

Come Follow, Come Follow

by

Elizabeth A. Harvey

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in English.

Whitman College
2016

Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Elizabeth A. Harvey has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in English.

Scott Elliott

Whitman College
May 5, 2016

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Part I.....	5
Heart Beats.....	6
Violet Sky.....	8
In the Beginning.....	12
Playing to the Crowd.....	20
Watcher.....	25
What Came Before.....	26
Part II.....	28
Take a Seat.....	29
Shut Eye.....	35
Not a Drop.....	38
Back Again.....	39
Composition.....	43
Waking, Walking, Wheeling.....	45
Something Which Abrogates.....	50
Part III.....	51
Strings.....	52
Alix.....	55
Ione.....	56
Jamin.....	57
Nova.....	58
Kaede.....	59
Selene.....	60
Zandre.....	61
Ari.....	62
You.....	64
Afterward.....	65

Acknowledgements

A thousand thank you's to everyone who has supported my creative writing over the years: my parents, my sister, my friends, my amazing teachers. To my circus instructors, who have taught me to dare the impossible; my music instructors, who have taught me how to listen closely; my dance instructors, who have taught me how to live authentically in my own body. To my thesis advisor, Scott Elliott, for being so flexible with the creative process and providing the constructive feedback I needed to continue pushing through, and to my major advisor, Gaurav Majumdar, for providing me with the background of brilliant texts and literary theory to work from (and reminding me that in-between is a space I am allowed to occupy).

To Milo and Radar, for providing much needed emotional support and cuddling on the couch with me for hours while I worked.

And a special thank you to my Aunt Jeanne, who has inspired me time and again with her commitment to writing creatively and bringing life to stories that too often go untold. You encouraged me to pursue this project despite my fears, and you have been there every step of the way. Your love is woven into every word I write.

Part I

Heart Beats

You run along the path, bare feet on the dirt softened by travel. At the bend you hop over the ditch at the edge of the road, grab a branch of the nearest tree and swing yourself off the path, into the woods.

The leaves are changing color. Brown ones pave the ground, crunching deliciously under your feet. Light kaleidoscopes across your face, green-red-gold. You listen: quick breaths, inhale exhale; crackle of each footfall, vibrations shuddering up from heel to spine; scuttle, chirp, scratch of the living woods; a soft hum that might be the swaying of birch and aspen, a soft warm wind in your ears, two lips pursed together... Can you hear the music?

The drums come in first. You wonder if your heartbeat has become audible outside the confines of your chest— is that an echo coming from beyond the trees? But the tempo increases until your heart can't beat quickly enough to keep up— you had it backwards, the echo is inside your chest. Syncopated rhythm, arriving just after the down beat.

Next the tambourine. In the breaks of light between the trees you can picture it: a hand beating against the taut skin, metallic halo of cymbals glimmering with each jangling sound.

A single low string comes in, light melody riding on the percussion and leading you closer like a thread in a labyrinth.

The moment before you break out of the trees, the voices begin. The harmonies move together as a single, multi-layered tone.

The light flickers again across your face and then shines at full blast and you see them. Faces you thought existed now only in your memory taking form in front of you, pulling their two small wagons slowly along the narrow road. They have not seen you yet; you watch, gaze dancing among them: the impish-looking one with a high, clear voice who is helping to pull the first wagon; the tall, gangly one who walks holding an 8-shaped string instrument by the neck, tugging a bow across the strings; finally the one with the lowest voice of all, the foundation, the Ringmaster.

Twigs in your hair and dirt and leaves coating your feet, you fall upon the circus like a creature of the woods.

“Ari!” you cry, and she catches you in her arms, still singing. You smile at her smell, like dried herbs and the remnants of fire-smoke. Her wrinkles seem to have mapped out new streams, tributaries branching out across her skin. Wispy grey hair tickles your cheeks and you close your eyes. You can feel her voice, the voice of each of them, vibrating all the way through you from her chest and hug her, hug her, inhale, exhale.

Violet Sky

From the wagons they pull worn dark purple canvas, long metal poles, and short stakes, scraps collected over years and carefully bound together. Having settled in the clearing just outside the concrete walls of the compound, the group begins to construct the tent; the eight individuals move like one organism, turning the project into a kind of dance. You stand off to the side, at the edge of the woods, wishing you knew the steps to join in.

Selene is the most graceful of all; her long blond hair hangs loose, swinging around her shoulders as she and Jamin pull a pole up to vertical, slipping it into a carefully dug hole to steady it. You smile as you notice that she, like you, walks barefoot. You can't make out what they're saying, but you can see that Jamin's lips are moving and his hands, when not occupied by setting up, gesticulate emphatically. A smile crosses your mouth as you recognize the familiar energy in his movements—he never stops performing, never speaks without a hint of laughter in his voice.

Two other pairs set up poles, triangulated with the one that Selene and Jamin had set up. Alix and Nova have settled their pole, and Nova holds it steady as Alix climbs to the top and adjusts something. You hadn't realized how much you missed Alix—their excitement to try everything, their constant movement (right now, it was the fidgeting of their fingers with the latch at the top of the pole), their dirty blond hair that stuck up in the mornings, part of the hair on the side flattened and then a tuft above the flat part just sticking straight out.

And Nova— he knew how to be present without overwhelming a space, which must have been a practiced skill for him given the fact that he tended to draw people’s eyes. He’s as gorgeous as you remember: olive brown skin, long dark hair pulled back into a braid, emphasizing the curves of his nose, cheeks, jaw, and the dark warmth of his eyes.

As your gaze travels toward the third pair, it crosses Zandre, skirting around the outside of the group.

Zandre seems not to have changed at all; you’d assumed the two of you were the same age, but Zandre still looks so young... or perhaps you simply overestimate your own age. You can’t tell what Zandre is doing, but the muttering and complicated hand symbols indicate some sort of ritual.

Zandre passes by, and you find Ione working in what seems to be comfortable silence with someone you haven’t seen before. You had forgotten how strong Ione was; her sleeveless shirt shows off the muscles that curve in waves along her arms and back. Her companion seems a match for Ione’s strength, and for her shyness.

And Ari— she seems to have disappeared, and you look around in confusion for a moment until she emerges from the trees to your left.

“Kaede is her name,” Ari says, tilting her head at the newcomer. You nod. Kaede. She has straight, silky black hair, chopped short just above her shoulders, and you have not yet seen her smile.

“Where’s Pyotr?” you ask; Ari simply shakes her head and says: “Gone.”

Gone... before you have time to contemplate what exactly this means, Ari is speaking again.

“Come,” she says, “We could use one more hand with the tent.” You hesitate for a moment, but Ari’s palm is held out in offering: will you take this dance?

You accept her hand and follow Ari into the midst of the set up. The deep violet canvas of the tent has been carefully laid out, the three poles set up as support, and the fourth and final pole, taller and heavier than the others, waiting to be lifted up to carry the fabric above them. Kaede, Nova, and Jamin are positioned on one end of the pole to help lift; Alix and Selene stand on the opposite side to support, and attached to the top is a rope, waiting for Ione, Zandre, and you— you— to help pull the pole to standing. You grip the rope, and Ari grabs hold behind you.

It seems a little silly for a moment, to have two people barely out of childhood and the oldest woman you’ve ever known performing this task of physical exertion— but the next moment Ari cries out “HUP!” and everyone is pushing, pulling, steadying at once, and of course you are all doing it, together, and you feel your arms burn and you know that Ione at the front is carrying the majority of the weight but you can feel the pull that you and Zandre and Ari have, and all the weight you take is weight that the others don’t have to carry, and you pull as hard as you can—

And the tent rises up around you, the pole settles into place, dark violet eclipsing the sky. You release the rope, breathing heavily. Ari places a hand on your shoulder and nods. You can’t help your grin and you turn around and hug her, again.

When you pull away, you find everyone dispersing to secure the tent and begin preparing for tonight's performance. Alix is standing on Ione's shoulders, reaching the tops of the poles to clip in the canvas. Nova has recruited Jamin to help him set up the aerial rig. It is a flurry of movement, a dance again. You step back, slip through the opening flap of the tent, and are once again outside. The sun has slipped behind the trees and clouds of purple haze hover around the horizon in all directions. Opposite the sunset you can see the compound, grey concrete walls immune to the colors of the sky.

There had always been this feeling, when you're in there. When you woke up in the morning flat on your back, first sight the underside of the bunk above you; when you sat for hours filling bottles in the stream, hearing only the babble of water; when you ate your evening meal of dried meat and the silence became a buzz in your ears. You had never known what to call it.

Then Ari came, bringing her people with her. They told stories, danced stories, sang, swung, spun, acted out stories. They asked you questions and gave you a burning for more, for words spoken out loud and memories shared in the movements of the body beyond language, for long hugs and laughter. Circus, they called it.

And just as quickly, they left. The laughter lingered a few days, the stories repeated throughout the compound, but soon even those faded. The compound returned to being I's instead of we and the feeling returned. The grey mesh holding up the bunk above you. The nonsense language of the stream. The heavy silence at sunset.

Alone. It's called being alone.

In the Beginning

“In the beginning,” Ari says, “there was everything. Imagine every laugh you’ve ever heard, every beam of light that has warmed your skin, the sound of every drop of rain falling on the earth, the taste of every piece of bread you’ve ever eaten, the scent of air in every breath you’ve ever taken. Every person you have ever touched.” Everyone squeezes together just slightly tighter, brushing shoulders, nudging hands.

Ari, wrapped in a woven shawl despite the warmth of the night, is circled by fifty or so individuals— mostly people you know from the compound, people you’ve lived alongside for days, months, or years. The tent creates a domed shelter, the people form an outer ring, and an inner ring of unoccupied space circles the main pole and fire pit at the center. Ari sits on the bench directly behind you. As her sentences ripple outward through the crowd, she leans her weight slightly forward into her cane. You hug your knees up closer to your chest and let your head rest back against her legs.

“Now,” she says, “imagine the smallest thing you can.” The youngest listeners begin shouting out:

“A mouse!”

“My pinky toe!”

“An ant!”

“A grain of rice!”

“A grain of sand!” Everyone is silent for a moment.

One high-pitched voice ventures, “A bacteria?”

Ari lets the impatient silence linger for a moment longer before continuing. “In the beginning, everything that is, was, and will be, was contained in a space so small it was smaller than a grain of sand. Smaller than bacteria. As small as small could possibly be.

“But what is small will grow, what is contained will come undone, and what can will be. And so everything that is, was, and will be burst forth into the universe, so loud it did not even make a sound. Light flashed, earth, fire, water, and air collided into each other. Planets and stars formed and died and reformed. Everything that is, and will be, was.

“Everything, that is, except for stories.”

You open your eyes— you hadn’t realized at first that they had fluttered shut—and stare into the fire in front of you. Watch the play of light and dark, illuminating the faces that fill your peripheral vision. Faces you know, but somehow the light makes them unfamiliar.

“In the beginning, everything was without a why for being. The stories came to be slowly, not all at once. The pieces of the universe moved so quickly that nothing could be for more than an instant. All forces, all energies, moved simultaneously as one, in and around each other, indivisible, unbeing. Yet to not be is exhausting, and they tired, and their movement slowed, slowed just enough that the force of Joining separated itself from the others. The Joining force, the Ringmaster of the universe, took the first breath of air.”

Ari pauses, closes her eyes, and takes in a slow, deep breath. You follow suit, the light of the fire dancing on the backs of your eyelids, your ribs spreading apart as they take in air. Silence follows the collective exhale.

“At the moment the Ringmaster came into being, the Ringmaster was Watched. The Watcher never sleeps and never, never stops watching. In those first instants, the Ringmaster saw the Watcher. They moved close, moved as if they would dissolve into nonbeing again, become one, again. But the Ringmaster, feeling the gaze of the Watcher, could not un-be, and the Watcher could not un-see the Ringmaster’s self. And so the Ringmaster turned from the Watcher and looked to the forces of the universe.

“First the Ringmaster pulled out from the fiery energy the forces that manipulate the very fabric of the universe: the manipulators of form, of motion, and of being. The Contortionist, feeling the beauty of a formed shape, molded matter into bodies, stars, and planets. The Juggler, now conscious of his movement through space, spun and reeled in ecstasy. He tossed planets and stars into orbit and blew comets across the skies.

“The Enchanter, however, did not rejoice in becoming. She saw the stars and the planets tracing their solitary paths throughout the sky, she saw the Contortionist and the Juggler reveling in their own being, and she felt... pain. The pain of separation. She held out her palm—” Ari extends her own hand, palm facing outwards. One by one, the others sitting in the circle mirror her movement back to her.

“And the very fabric of space-time rippled. The Enchanter felt the power to perceive it all, to create it all in her mind. Each moment of her experience lay in front of her: past, present, and future. Each possibility held reality pregnant in it.

“She went to the Contortionist and asked, ‘What do you see?’

“The Contortionist responded, ‘I see shapes and forms: spheres and rings, rough surfaces and smooth gaseous atmospheres, spiral galaxies and figures in the space between the stars. It is beautiful,’ said the Contortionist.

“‘I think I see,’ said the Enchanter, for she could see the bodies the Contortionist spoke of. But the way the Contortionist spoke, she knew that she saw something slightly different.

“So the Enchanter went to the Juggler and asked, ‘What do you see?’”

“The Juggler responded, ‘I see movement and patterns: light racing and curving across space, planets spinning in orbit, stars growing and shrinking. It is beautiful,’ said the Juggler.

“‘It is,’ said the Enchanter, for she could see the movement the Juggler spoke of. But the way the Juggler spoke, she knew he saw patterns that remained invisible to her.

“So the Enchanter went to the Ringmaster, and of the Ringmaster she asked: ‘Ringmaster, the Contortionist sees shapes and the Juggler sees movement and I see both, but neither as clearly as they do. What is the universe, really?’

The Ringmaster, who understood the pain the Enchanter felt, whispered to her —” Ari dropped her voice to a whisper— “‘All that you see is an illusion. Even the

separation between planets and stars, between me and you. Tell it what you want it to be and it will become.’

“The Enchanter meditated for a long while on what she wanted the universe to be, but to no avail. She didn’t want it to be anything but what it was. Finally she arose and held both palms open in front of her:

“‘Let there be others to tell what they see, she said, of bodies, of movement, and of that which is both and neither.’

“And from the energy of the universe her words called forth three others: the Puppeteer, the Dancer, and the Bard. Smiling upon her creations, the Enchanter said, ‘Tell me a story!’

“‘What story is there to tell?’ asked the three, for they had but just sprung into existence.

“The Enchanter, realizing her error, bid them instead: ‘Find me a story!’

“And so the Puppeteer, the Dancer, and the Bard, traveled from galaxy to galaxy. The Dancer watched a planet of gas with vicious storms and ever-shifting winds and a center which was so hot that particles collided constantly, changing in form. The Dancer began to mimic these movements, choreographing a series of leaps and spins to mirror the erratic and violent movement of particles— and yet something was missing from the dance: that sensation that carries one movement to the next.

“The Puppeteer came across a cold, unchanging planet of ice at the edge of a solar system. This planet was circled by several small moons, each of different composition. The Puppeteer constructed a series of spheres to move around each other,

painting each to fit the colors and moving them in the same differing patterns of speed and direction of the planet and moons. Yet this movement lacked some irregularity, some sense of the unexpected.

“The Bard came across a planet where water, earth, fire, and air had blended into something else. Many somethings— somethings seeing and seen.

“And with these somethings, three new Forces had come into being: the Daredevil, the master of fear, who propelled life forward unceasing; the Jester, bringer of laughter and joy, who gave life reason beyond fear; and finally the Acrobat, who with a touch could connect two lives. How could such a thing have happened? How could it be told?

“The Puppeteer, the Dancer, and the Bard returned to the Enchanter to tell of what they had seen. The Dancer performed a wild dance, moving the particles of space in response, and the Enchanter was pleased by the movement but said ‘I do not see the story.’

“The Puppeteer replicated the movement of planetary puppets, demonstrating perfect celestial order, and the Enchanter was pleased by the precision of these movements but said ‘This is not yet a story.’

“The Bard watched these performances and knew that there was some other way to tell. Something that starts as a deep-down rumble then pushes up your throat and hums in your mouth and buzzes against your lips and rolls off your tongue—” and Ari began to sing, her voice low and laden with a slow vibrato:

Come follow, come follow

Where night turns to day

What was lost in the dark

Has come out to play

Come follow, come follow

Where day turns to night

What stirs in the shadows

Is soon to take flight

Come follow, come follow

Where rain turns to sun

A glimmer of knowing

Has newly begun

Come follow, come follow

Where sun turns to rain

Falling can teach you

to feel more than pain”

Ari moves into a final verse, this one half humming and half noises that do not seem to be words. At the edge of your vision the canvas tent flap flutters gently.

“The Enchanter, puzzled by these words, followed the Bard back to this planet, and there she watched for many years. She fell in love with the way that the beings there looked back up at the stars and saw shapes that she never would have seen. She fell in love with the way they listened to the energy of the Bard and the Dancer and the Puppeteer moving within them, and began to each tell stories in their own ways. And she fell in love with a young person whose questions exceeded even the Enchanter’s own— but that is a story for another time, and I have gotten ahead of myself.

“In the beginning, everything was without a why for being. The stories came to be slowly, not all at once. They arose in the ancient life under the sea, stories of darkness, blinks of awareness, fear and survival. They arose in the primal creatures that ruled the earth, stories of power, change, pleasure and pain. They arose in the first beings to soar through the skies, stories of strength, will, rising and falling and rising again. They arose in our ancestors, the first to use fire, stories of creation and destruction in answer to the universe, stories of grasping with our hands, running on our two feet, listening with our ears, tasting with our tongue, loving with our hearts, and speaking with mind-body entire.

“Because stories are told. That is why we are here.

“Let the tellings begin.”

Playing to the Crowd

Underneath the purple tent, the firelight illuminates Kaede sitting cross-legged, motionless, in the center of her hoop. She waits, feeling the light against closed eyelids, waits still. The expectation building around her feeds her energy, pumps her heart faster. Finally she leans forward, extending one arm to trace all the way around the hoop, starting in front of her and swinging clockwise. Her touch is slow, soft, and she feels the hoop as if it, too, is watching her, waiting, wanting.

As her arm sweeps behind her, she extends her legs forward and arches back to increase her reach. Her fingers finally brush their way back to the front, placing her in a forward bend, chin resting on extended knees. She shifts her weight forward, moving into a handstand, twisting the hoop up as she goes. The hoop has become mobil, character, a frame through which to watch Kaede.

Her arms extend and her feet find their place against the top of the hoop: her body creates an X, circled by the O of the hoop. And she begins to spin, like a coin that has been flicked, rotating around the same point until she shifts her weight just slightly and now she rolls like a wheel. All around her the audience sways with her motion.

Inside the wheel she bends a knee, extends a leg, dances as she continues to roll upside down and right-side up within the wheel. I've been going in circles, her movements seem to say. Again and again and again. Trying to find some form to create in this limited space.

She pulls back into the middle and the wheel spins faster. She kicks off the floor and her speed increases again, until she is a blur in the movement. Kaede becomes lost in the rapid cycle. Around and around and around.

Suddenly a foot has stepped outside of the wheel, and now the wheel continues to spin but Kaede stands outside of it. Steady, for the first time, on her own two feet. She releases the wheel entirely and the break feels revolutionary. The wheel spirals around behind her, once, twice, and returns directly into her outstretched hand.

Who are we when we are not this?

Ione stands with arms straight overhead, holding Alix up in a handstand. On her own Ione is tall, and together the two of them are the tallest creature the audience has ever seen.

Ione bends knees and elbows and propels Alix into the air. Alix's arms snap down in form, body remaining straight through a twist and flip. Head and hips and pointed toes spin in a perfect line, feet come down to the ground, knees bend and arms raise for balance.

To the accompaniment of claps, cheers, and whistles, Alix moves immediately into a cartwheel, palms to the ground and legs overhead. On the second cartwheel, Ione is there, catching Alix's hips upside down and holding on tight. Alix's arms wrap around Ione's waist and Ione's legs become Alix's arms and the cartwheels continue, two bodies one.

They can feel eyes watching, unused to really seeing, trying to parse the blur of a being as they wheel around once, twice, three times before the bodies become two again and both launch away into a back handspring, to standing, arms upraised. Mirror images, Alix and Ione tuck right foot under and shift their weight, fall to the ground, swing legs around, come back up toward each other and run the last few paces between them, hands held in front, palms facing forward, until they just barely meet.

They stand in front of each other, hands so close they can feel the heat radiating from each other's palms, yet not quite touching. They can feel the audience leaning in intimately. This takes so much more strength than flipping, wheeling, holding: to stop momentum and bring motion to stillness.

Who are we when we are not this?

Jamin tosses the club from one hand to the other, his eyes wide in the wonder at the arc it makes through the air, resisting the upward propulsion of his right hand and insisting on falling downward to his left. He tosses it again, higher, and this time it takes one, two, three full rotations before it lands cleanly back in the palm of his right hand.

In the unilluminated shadows at the front of the audience you wait, heart beating, hands sweating, eyes focused on the performance. Jamin meets your eye and gives the smallest of nods. The moment seems to have come too soon; you feel unprepared; all thought has left your mind as you toss him a second club and it is not until it is already in the air that you experience the sensation of throwing it.

Jamin catches the second club in his right hand and twirls both clubs simultaneously in a figure-eight whirl. You toss a third club and the first club leaves Jamin's hand just in time for the third club to fall firmly into his palm.

And just like that, the pattern is begun; one club always in the air, one rising from his hand, one falling into it. Having played your part, you fade back into the audience, captivated, watching.

The audience claps and Jamin grins. He takes a deep breath and blows onto the clubs as each lifts into the air and the tips burst into flames.

The audience does not clap this time, but gasps. Shock, fear, self-preservation instincts satisfied by an inexplicable trust in his control. His grin widens and he propels the flaming clubs high into the air, 1-2-3, spins around, catches each, 1-2-3. The fire licks his neck, his chin, the softest of kisses, gone too quickly to burn but just slow enough to leave a tingling warmth against him. The pattern of the clubs becomes more complex, single spins into double spins into no spin, behind his back and over his shoulder, catching and whirling around each other.

Jamin moves with the clubs, first just swaying, then spinning around with them, dancing with the fire. Again all three clubs fly into the air, almost at once. Jamin kneels and catches all three within his hands. Taking a breath even deeper than before, he holds the clubs above his head and blows upwards. Three fires roll together and roar into the empty space, and just before the furthest edge of the flame reaches the fabric of the tent it extinguishes into blackness.

The glimmering golden after-image is all that the audience can see as they cheer.

Who are we when we are not this?

Watcher

Selene's dance is captivating: you watch her twirl and kick, knives flying through the air and somehow returning right into her grip. She moves quickly— so quickly that you almost miss it when a throw curved behind her back lands slightly off, nicks her hand, and a drop of blood flings out alongside the sweat.

She keeps going, but your heart rate has increased and you turn your eyes away, afraid to look. They never mess up, none of the performers. That's part of the performance. This can't be right. You lean back into Ari and she squeezes your shoulder. Turning your head back, you whisper: "Ari? I thought you said... I thought you said you never come back to the same place twice."

She is quiet for a while. You almost turn away, thinking she didn't hear you, or doesn't want to interrupt the performance. It's such a strange thing, saying goodbye. You thought you were saying it forever. You were never supposed to see them again. But you heard that music beyond the trees, and you knew, and the moment you saw them it was as if they'd never left. The goodbyes had never happened. But they had, and if Ari was back...

"We realized what was missing." *What was missing?* You almost ask, but Ari is watching the performance again and you doubt your words would garner a response. What could possibly be here that they do not have?

You glance around at the crowd, as if an answer will present itself.

Zandre is gone.

What Came Before

Crackling fire and cackling cheering in the distance.

No longer there. Elsewhere, always elsewhere.

People. Many. And the air humming between them— too much.

No longer there.

Walking through the compound. Dark cement walls. Shadows dancing on the walls.

Whispering.

Why did they never talk about it?

Zandre heard the whispers. Stronger here, in the grey. They called to Zandre with an older name: “Cassandra...”

They had built this. Kept knowledge— distorted, but kept. Of what had happened.

No words.

No collections of stories, aside from Ari's songs, vibrations in the air, movements of the body.

No sheets but the ones slept in and no leaves but the ones on trees.

No others understood when Zandre drew symbols in the dirt.

What was kept in metal and stone. In a language we have forgotten to speak.

Gradual. Not like they thought. Words like "nuclear" and "carbon emissions" and "over-population." Too simple.

Mostly the whispers said one thing: Sorry. So sorry. So sorry.

Part II

Take a Seat

Kaede's shoes tapped out an uneven rhythm as she descended the stairs into the tunnel: *ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum*. She hopped over the barrier at the tunnel's entrance and walked to the southbound platform.

There had probably been a sign once.

Kaede didn't notice its absence; she knew the system well enough to navigate the tunnels without arrows or color coding.

The train came once a day, when the sun was about a quarter of the way up. Once a day it stopped at the platform and opened its doors for whoever was, or wasn't, waiting.

Kaede was the first at the platform today. She dumped her pack on the floor next to a bench and leaned against the concave wall, one leg straight and the other knee bent, foot resting against the wall. She crossed her arms and watched the tracks reaching back into the darkness of the tunnel.

When she was little, she used to wonder what made the trains go. People threw around words like "solar energy" and "magnetism." They said that the trains would just stop some day. They'd been saying that for as long as she could remember, though, and in seventeen years, she had only heard of one train stopping, and that was because some idiots had tried to change the tracks.

No, Kaede had learned that trains were the one thing she needed them to be: dependable. She didn't need to know why.

Some time had passed before Kaede heard another set of footsteps cascading down the stairs. She kept her gaze on the tunnel and self-consciously reached up to rub a finger along two-day old stubble peppering her chin.

The person kept their distance from Kaede, sitting several benches down. She could just make them out through her peripheral vision: they, too, carried a heavy sack. The stops didn't all have agreed upon names, but this one most everyone knew as Bounty. Kaede had never seen as many people at a time as she saw in Bounty. But she also never saw the same people twice here. Halfway between the northern and southern ends of the tunnels, Bounty was a concrete maze of materials. People came for water, food, tools. Most left what they could in return: seeds brought from the outside, metal scraps they had collected, patched-together blankets or sacks.

It wasn't much longer until Kaede heard the low hum of the approaching train. The sound was surprisingly soft, the only indication of speed the rush of air that blew through the tunnel moments before the train, already slowing, slid smoothly to a stop at the platform.

A couple people disembarked: a kid several years younger than Kaede, dark-skinned with cropped hair curled tight against their head; one person with pale skin and bags under their eyes and a gaze that darted around rapidly; another, older, who had dirt smudged into their skin and clothes and smelled like... tea? Was that what real leaves smelled like? From outside?

Outside. She'd always wondered...

Kaede's eyes followed the dirt-stained person: the slow swing in their stride, their hands hanging loosely at their sides, the sway of the fabric of their clothes capturing her gaze until they disappeared up the stairs.

The other person waiting at the platform had already boarded the train several cars down. Kaede grabbed up her bag and jogged into the nearest car. It would be a few more moments until the doors closed, but she didn't want to have to wait around in Bounty another day before leaving.

As she sat down, she realized there was another passenger in her car. Unusual, at this stop— most people got off the train in Bounty at least for a day to collect or drop off supplies.

Kaede blinked, an attempt to assure herself of indifference. The train doors slid closed. Too late to switch cars.

The acceleration as the train began to move was barely perceptible from inside the car— there were no windows, and the only indication that the journey had begun was a familiar gentle tug in Kaede's gut.

Okay, then.

Kaede sunk down in her seat and rested her head against the back of the chair. The next stop wouldn't be for a while, not until mid-afternoon at least. Kaede let her eyelids shut and fell asleep within moments.

Two sensations woke Kaede, and she wasn't sure which to deal with first: the tightening in her stomach that told her she probably needed food, or the feeling of the other passenger's gaze on her. She hadn't spoken for... a day, at least, and the thought

of using her vocal chords felt odd, so she reached down into her pack and pulled out a nutrition bar. She peeled away the plastic and nibbled slowly. She tried to keep her eyes distracted, staring at the floor, at the wall, avoiding the other side of the car where the passenger sat.

About halfway through the bar, she gave in and glanced over.

Meeting gazes resulted in the same internal shock as always. Kaede felt her whole body freeze up and seem to restart in fast-motion, like it was making up for the lost moment.

The other passenger was the one to break the silence.

“Ariadne. She.” She put a hand to her chest and then held it out, palm up, toward Kaede. Kaede forced herself to finish chewing and swallow. She blinked, then reached into her chest and managed to pull out sound:

“Kaede. She.” The other passenger— Ariadne— smiled. Now that Kaede had finally looked over, she was able to actually examine Ariadne. She had weather-worn skin like leather, creased along familiar folds. Several remaining dark strands colored her grey hair, pulled back into a thick braid. Kaede was usually quite good at guessing about how old people were, but something about Ariadne seemed to elude aging. A simple wooden cane leaned up against the chair next to her, but she certainly didn’t have the typical gauntness that seemed to come over the age of forty or so for most. Her many layers of clothing made Kaede’s evaluation no easier. Ariadne wore a thick colored skirt over loose cotton pants, multiple cotton shirts and an assortment of woven shawls and wraps over top. Kaede frowned. She couldn’t tell how much of Ariadne’s

weight belonged to her body and how much to her clothes, and all those folds of fabric offered a lot of space to conceal... something.

“You have nothing to fear from me.” Kaede’s eyes snapped back to Ariadne’s face. Kaede usually found blue eyes to be the most piercing, but in Ariadne’s dark, dark brown eyes she felt engulfed, naked... seen. Kaede swallowed. Plenty of questions came to mind— What do you want? Where are you going? Why are you talking to me? Who are you?— but she sensed that none of them would elicit a satisfactory answer. So she pushed the questions down and hardened her gaze and remained obstinately silent.

Ariadne broke the silence with a question of her own: “Where are you headed?”

Kaede blinked, not expecting to be the one providing answers.

“South. Last stop, or maybe one before.”

“What’s waiting for you there?” Kaede frowned again.

“Nothing. I mean, something, probably. I don’t know. I haven’t been south for a few seasons.” Kaede didn’t mention that part of her interest in going south lay beyond the tunnel system. She’d always wanted to explore, and many times had disembarked at the last stop with the intention to travel further on foot, but something always held her back. It was addicting, the motion of the trains. The mobility.

“Are you afraid?” Kaede opened her mouth to protest that no, of course she wasn’t afraid to leave the tunnel system, she just hadn’t felt like it yet— and then realized that Ariadne could not have heard her internal dialogue, and her question could not have been specifically pointed at that particular fear.

“Fear is what keeps me alive,” she found herself saying instead. “It’s simply practical. Fear is meant to be listened to.” Kaede could not quite read the expression, but it seemed that Ariadne had smiled— or something had deepened the wrinkles on either side of her mouth.

“So you are not afraid to confront your fears, then?”

Kaede resisted the urge to squirm in her seat. “I do as I must,” she responded, and the dam of questions that seemed to fill up her airway finally broke loose: “Why do you care? Why are you talking to me?”

“I am getting off the train at the last stop,” Ariadne said, “and I am traveling beyond the tunnel system, where there is green and dirt and people who matter very much to me. People who I believe would like to meet you.” Kaede’s jaw tightened— she had seen groups before, she knew what they could do. But— outside...

“I dare you,” said Ariadne, her eyes catching hold of Kaede’s and not letting go, “I dare you to follow.”

Shut Eye

The first night Kaede spent with the circus she lay awake for hours. She had never slept next to other people before, at least not that she could remember. She could sleep just about anywhere— on hard ground, on benches, on train seats. The occasional cot was a luxury. But ease with sleeping in most any surface or position apparently did not extend to sleeping in any environment.

How did they sleep like this, night after night? Ariadne and the one called Jamin snored. The small, light-skinned one who introduced themselves with no gender twitched, making constant rustling noises. Occasionally the tall, muscular one whose dark skin was patterned with patches of light freckles would wake up in response. Ione — that was her name— slept next to the small one and when the small one started, Ione would hum quietly.

The strange child seemed not to sleep during the night, but at least stayed quiet in the corner. The last two made no noise, although Nova was distracting enough, in his own way. He was beautiful, a physical quality which Kaede rarely noticed in people.

Needless to say, it was a restless night. Kaede spent the majority of it mentally reviewing her first day outside the tunnel system:

She had thought that her first step outside would change everything. That it would stay with her forever. It wasn't like that.

At the southernmost train stop there was a small compound. Ariadne and Kaede did not pass by any other living beings as they walked away from the exit to the train

tunnel, although Kaede noted that both she and her companion glanced several times at the smoke rising from a distant concrete structure. Whether someone (or several someones) had taken up semi-permanent residence there or were simply stopping for a short time, she couldn't say.

The landscape changed gradually. The dull grey that made up most of Kaede's world faded into a light brown so slowly that she scarcely noticed. Small specks of growth began to appear in the dirt, yellow yearning toward green. Ariadne stopped occasionally, though not nearly as frequently as Kaede would have expected. The first time she stopped, she took a jar of water from her bag and, before drinking from it, offered it to Kaede. Kaede stared at the jar for a very long time, unsure how to respond to being offered something. She honestly could not recall the last time another person had held something out to her in the same way.

When she finally did respond, it was to shake her head and pull her own bottle of water out of her pack.

The first bits of green appeared on low bushes long before Kaede observed anything that could be qualified as a tree, let alone a forest. They had left the train station some time mid-morning, and it wasn't until dusk that scrawny trees appeared. Ariadne could have been planning to continue well into the night for all Kaede knew, but once they began, the trees began to rapidly increase in height, breadth, color— at least as far as Kaede could tell in the dimming light. And it could not have been long past dark when they saw a flickering light in the distance: fire.

At the sight of that light, Ariadne spoke the first word she had spoken since they had arrived at the final station: “Home.”

Not a Drop

In her dream she was floating, gliding steadily a short height above brackish green waves. The water heaved from wind, white caps forming and dissolving again, yet the air around her body was warm and still. This did not strike her as odd.

A huge mountain appeared on the horizon— or perhaps it had been there and she simply hadn't looked yet. It was covered in green, the deep dark green of pines, just far enough away that the trees blended together into one mass on the mountain.

She realized she was holding her breath.

Dark, heavy clouds gathered over the mountain. She could feel the weight of rain not-yet-fallen, turning the air thick like mud.

She still had not taken a breath.

The rain must fall now, she could feel it. The clouds could not possibly hold any longer. Yet they did, they did, and the air grew thicker, and the sky changed from smokey grey to charcoal-indigo, and still the rain did not come.

She realized that even if she tried to breathe she could not, and it was only upon realizing this that her chest began to heave. The lack of wind against her, when it touched all of the waves around her, suddenly felt smothering.

She turned her gaze, eyes tearing, up to the dark clouds.

Still not a drop fell.

Back Again

Ione awoke, as she usually did, to the hazy purple light that permeated the tent as the sun rose. She breathed in deeply the smell of the tent, of sleeping companions, of a warm day ahead. Alix was, at long last, sleeping soundly beside her. Ione pressed a gentle kiss to Alix's forehead before rising and rolling up her bedmat.

She stretched and glanced around the tent: Selene was gone, probably on her morning run. Nova was still asleep, though he seemed to be in the restless stage just before waking. Zandre had finally fallen asleep. Jamin and Alix both slept still— they tended to be the last to wake, discounting Zandre's nocturnal schedule. Ari would be out meditating.

Ione saw a ninth sleeping mat, and it took her a moment to remember the new arrival who had followed Ariadne back from her trip to the tunnel system. When Ione found that Ari was gathering from the tunnel system, she had assumed that meant going to Bounty for supplies.

“Gathering,” clearly, did not only apply to supplies.

It had been months since they had lost Pyotr to a cough that refused to leave until he went with it. He was their puppeteer and also the one who had taught Ione much of what she knew of acrobatics. He had been younger than Ari, but that was unsurprising— most died younger than Ari. Ione bent her head in a habitual moment of remembrance. Eyes closed and palms spread open, facing outwards, she mouthed the words to herself:

“May the Watcher ever see your light, may the Puppeteer ever tell your tale, and may the Enchanter weave you into the ever-changing tapestry of Being.” She was glad Alix was asleep— Alix never really understood why it was that Ione had adopted Ari’s practice of calling on the Forces of the beginning, but there was something about it that Ione found comforting. She spoke to each of the twelve, though of course she had her preferences.

Raising her head, she exited the tent and found Kaede standing outside, staring at the trees surrounding the area.

This new one that Ari brought, Kaede— she did not seem like a puppeteer. Kaede had been mostly silent since her arrival the previous afternoon. Ione, remembering the feeling (though she herself had been younger when Ari found her), smiled sadly. She was not usually the first to speak, but given the circumstances she figured there would be no other way to break the newcomer’s silence.

“How did you sleep?”

Kaede turned around, appearing slightly startled.

“Um. Not very... I do not understand how you all sleep together, in the same space. It’s...” Kaede trailed off, and Ione nodded.

“I couldn’t sleep my first few nights here, either. Now I couldn’t imagine sleeping alone.”

Kaede frowned slightly, and Ione couldn’t tell whether this was a reaction to Ione’s comment or some internal struggle to verbalize a response. After a moment, Kaede spoke again: “When I did... drift off, I had an odd dream— I remember seeing

water, vast amounts of water, and green land that stretched up higher than any hill I've ever seen, and I couldn't—I felt so sc—" Kaede seemed to cut herself off.

Ione stilled. She had not remembered it upon waking, but Kaede's words instantly brought back the feeling: she had been floating... the sky was so heavy, too heavy to hold... she couldn't breathe...

"Where are you from, Kaede?" Kaede looked at Ione in confusion. Ione knew that this was not a question one usually asked; the multitudes of possible answers, the unknowns, the lack of common context all made it nearly pointless.

"I grew up riding the trains..." Kaede said by way of answer.

Ione nodded. "Me too. I had a sib, then, younger than me... I don't know where he is now."

Kaede nodded. "Never had any sibs. Well, chosen, at least. Possible that the same ones who birthed me birthed others."

"It changed things. Having him... and losing him. It's a lot like it is here, actually. Jamin, Zandre, Selene... they're all like having sibs again."

"And Alix?"

Ione blushed. "Not quite." The conversation faltered, thoughts wandering toward memories not often recalled, feelings left undefined.

"There's so many people, Kaede. So many people we perform for, and then never see again. We may have seen each other, Kaede, on the trains, at one of the stops. But we just keep moving." Ione paused for a moment, not because her thought had not finished, but because it had simply ceased to be words.

“Kaede... I had a dream like that, too. It’s like we’ve been moving in spirals instead of circles, never tracing the same path twice. And it get so heavy, so tiring...”

Before either encountered the words or the courage to speak again, Ari appeared in the clearing and the late to rise emerged from the tent. Another day began.

Composition

At noon the wagons stopped for lunch. The others moved to the front— the new one, Kaede, accepted a sandwich from Ari and wandered off into the woods with her food. Zandre squatted on the ground, holding the plain roll that Ari offered without eating. Jamin and Nova began chatting about internal balance and the musicality of silence. Selene and Ione both sat nearby, quietly listening.

Alix leaned against a wheel, nibbling on a sandwich of egg and pickled vegetables tucked between two slices of airy white bread. As Alix chewed, their eyes scanned the trees. A warm breeze unsettled a flock of browning leaves and Alix's gaze followed a single leaf as it cartwheeled through the air, took a few forward rolls, and caught another leaf with it in a head-over-heels spin until accelerating speed pulled the two leaves apart.

Alix, focused entirely on the leaves, had forgotten to chew and unconsciously lowered the sandwich and set it atop the wheel. The first leaf dove down, suspended itself in the air for a moment, then began to settle into a swaying fall. Inches from the ground the second leaf fell into the first leaf, carried it up for a moment, then they circled around each other in a final descent, landing at last in a leafy embrace. Alix stared for several moments and then a grin tugged up the corner of their mouth. They pushed up to standing and bounced over to the leaves, gently picking each one up. They took a couple steps toward the front of the caravans, where Ione and the others

were, swung back to pick up the remains of their sandwich, then sprinted up to the front.

Ione was bent down, fidgeting with a wheel, when Alix sprung up behind her, holding the leaves, the rest of the sandwich stuck in their mouth. Ione turned to Alix and tilted her head to the side, bushy rust-red eyebrows furrowing inward. Alix's blue-grey eyes were big and bright and even after swallowing, Alix offered no words to explain.

"The leaves?" Ione asked, slowly turning her palm open in question, offering. Alix nodded emphatically, then gently set the leaves on the ground and took Ione's hand.

"Come, I want to try it."

Waking, Walking, Wheeling

Kaede had never eaten as much food in her life.

It was not that the food was particularly abundant, but the lifestyle— exercises, training, traveling not on trains but on her own two feet, working, gathering, more exercises— required that she eat more than the minimal diet she was accustomed to. And while she was accustomed to packaged food from Bounty, this was almost entirely new— meats and eggs and grains and vegetables, collected from compounds throughout the group’s travels and occasionally gathered from the woods themselves.

She also had never been so physically exhausted in her life— or at least, not in the same way. She had felt much more sleepy, much more defeated. But this sense of muscles burning, of pain coupled with accomplishment— this was new.

The day had begun with walking. Not *toward* something, which was another first for Kaede— even if she didn’t know what she was walking toward, she always walked with purpose. But this morning exercise, which Ariadne called simply “Walk-Stop-Fall,” demanded that each person walk in non-patterns, weaving in between and around each other. Kaede found it most difficult to avoid slipping into walking in a circle, or even a figure eight. On top of this, the group responded to unspoken commands: one person would freeze, and they would all stop. One would fall to the ground, and they would all fall. One would rise and walk again, and they would all follow. Sometimes they stayed still for minutes at a time, sometimes in strange positions halfway through a fall. At first Kaede struggled to keep up with what was

happening, but after they stopped for the last time, Kaede had begun to feel a hint of something— a sense that she was unfamiliar with, an awareness of the bodies around her. She couldn't quite do it, but she could feel how it would be possible to actually feel the decision to stop, fall, or walk as one, and to respond not to the visual cues but to the *sensation* of that impulse.

After Walk-Stop-Fall, the group went through a series of exercises together, most for building strength, and several for building flexibility and balance.

After morning warm-ups, they began to move. Two humble wagons held all of the supplies, and each wagon was pulled by three people at a time. Those not pulling walked alongside, switching in as the others tired. Kaede found herself tiring quickly, and though she pushed herself to continue, she often had to stop and walk. She was shocked that even Zandre participated in this.

The break for lunch was much appreciated, but did not last long. After Kaede had finished eating, Ariadne pulled a large metal ring out of the wagon. The ring was about as thick as Kaede's wrist and just under her own height.

"This," Ariadne said, "Is called a Cyr Wheel. There has not been a master of the Cyr Wheel for many years; it requires a great deal of strength, and a willingness to be thrown into confusion. I can teach you the technique, but you must bring everything you have to it before it will carry you."

And so Kaede's training began. It was days before Ariadne had her actually touch the wheel— she spent much of her time with Ione and Alix, struggling to keep up with their daily acrobatic training. After a couple weeks of headstands, handstands,

push ups, jumps, and what felt like countless nights of aching muscles, Kaede began to spend half the day training on the wheel.

At first, she had to master simply spinning in a circle— which was shockingly hard, given the way she had to simultaneously hold herself sturdy inside the ring and shift her weight just enough to wobble around.

By the time she had gotten to full head-over-heels revolutions, the weather had gotten colder. During these months, they rarely spent time moving the wagons, and instead spent several weeks at a time camped in the same place, training in the dry area underneath the tent. Kaede was used to the sensation of numb, cramped fingers, not from the cold so much as the many times she didn't quite adjust her grip quickly enough to avoid rolling right over them.

As she trained, she watched the others: Nova, alternating between rope, silks, and aerial hoop, practicing falling through the air and catching himself again and again; Selene, who danced, sometimes with knives, sometimes simply with her own body; Jamin, juggling anything and everything; Ione and Alix, balancing against each other; even Zandre, who Kaede had found performed illusions— slight of hand, the creation of shapes out of clouds of smoke, strange tellings of what had happened and had yet to happen in words that no one fully understood.

One morning when the air shifted from biting to pleasantly crisp, the group forewent the regular exercises and instead began to secure a strap in between two trees, just above the height of Kaede's neck. One by one, the circus members climbed up to

the secured line and attempted to walk across it. Selene was balanced enough to walk carefully across, despite the waving motion of the strap as she reached the center.

Jamin walked a few steps and then began dropping down, swinging up around, walking a few more steps again— he wiggled his legs about wildly with each step, his brown eyebrows rising and lips shaping into an “O” in an exaggerated expression of shock each time he slipped, but the consistency and accuracy with which he caught himself and spun back up to standing made it obvious to them all that he was in complete control.

Alix loved the climb up to the line, almost more than being on the line itself. Once on the line, they attempted to do a hand stand walk across it— it took several tries and much laughter before they made it all the way across.

Ione, Kaede noticed, kept her feet firmly on the ground.

When it came to be Kaede’s turn, she was shocked by how much more difficult it was than everyone had made it look— her leg shook so much with her first step across that she fell upon trying to set down a second foot.

The group spent the morning switching off turns, Kaede struggling to parse through the encouragement and varied advice of the circus—

Alix: “Try keeping your knees bent?”

Selene: “Feet parallel!”

Jamin: “Nono that’s harder, turn your feet out!”

Nova: “If you keep your arms out, you can use them for balance.”

Jamin: “But don’t *wave* them around like a nestling flapping before learning how to fly!”

Oftentimes, Jamin merely succeeded in making her double-over with laughter and slip, her fall softened by the waiting arms of either Nova or Ione.

That afternoon, Kaede performed her skills on Cyr Wheel for the rest of the group. It wasn’t perfect, and after so many weeks, going through her set of skills felt absurdly short. Yet the applause and Jamin’s hooting cheers brought a sense of something warm and pleasant to her chest, something like pride.

The following day, Ari announced that it was time to move again— time to prepare for a real performance.

Something Which Abrogates

“Ione?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m afraid.”

“What about?”

“I dunno. Everything. Nothing. I’m afraid of being nothing... I’m afraid that if I forget to keep being something, like if I stay too still, I’ll just fade away. But sometimes it’s so exhausting, to keep being.”

“Yeah.” Ione reached across the darkness to hold Alix’s hand.

Part III

Strings

You can't remember your first impression anymore. Whether that's because childhood memories slip away so easily or because first impressions never really seem to stick, you're not sure.

You remember there was a puppet show, the first time they came. You can't remember most of the story, nor can you recall much of Pyotr apart from his name, but you can still see the puppets: they had brightly painted faces, soft fabric covering their bodies, differently colored wooden toggles for shoes. You remember the way their feet bounced along with the rest of their body as they were moved across the small stage. There was one with yellow hair circled in a string of daisies, wearing a light blue dress and holding a sprig of lavender. There was another with dark hair upon which sat an odd hat— golden in color, but with no top, just a rim.

Afterwards Ari took you back to their wagon. Jamin was there— he seemed so much older than you then, but couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen. He tossed a club to you and motioned for you to toss it back. Your throw fell short and the club spun awkwardly, a mere half-spin, but Jamin's long arm stretched out to catch it anyways. He said you were a natural— it seemed such a strange thing to say at the time. You thought he was referring to the fact that you lived most of your life close to the trees— you knew there were others who lived away from here, in worlds of only metal and concrete where there was no green. Not natural.

Later you realized that wasn't the kind of natural he meant.

You remember thinking it was impossible— not just the physical feats, but the way that they knew, without speaking, how to occupy the same space as each other so comfortably, so gently.

You remember asking Ari question after question after question, about where they had been, about what the rest of the world was like, about the stories she told. Why did everyone clap after someone performed? What was out there, past the trees? Was it true that trains moved faster than a bird? What did she mean when she called the circus “family”? Had she ever seen one of the Forces? How had the Aerialist climbed up to the sky? How could one of us from down here become one of them up there?

Ari had laughed and told you that the Enchanter had fallen in love with the Aerialist’s questions, and the Aerialist’s how’s and why’s and when’s and who’s and what’s are what carried her higher than any other person had been before. She was still a person, though, even as she was a force. Something about energy and matter being the same.

This time, when Nova climbs his silks, reaching the top of the tent and fluttering down and climbing up again, you think of the Aerialist who climbed up to the stars. You think of watching those same stars in the nights after the first performance, and you wished you could climb up, not so that you could join the Forces that watched over this place but so that you could look down and see where the circus had gone, so that you could follow.

You told yourself you wouldn't fall asleep that night, after Ari said goodbye. You remembered her singing, a lullaby that may or may not have had words you knew, and you remembered teetering on the edge of sleep and fighting to keep listening to the song even though it had slipped from waking into your dreams. They had left early, must have started taking down camp before the crack of dawn, and by the time you opened your eyes the space where the tent had been was again just a clearing.

When Nova bows and the other members of the circus come out to stand with him and the people living in the compound put their hands together, a clap of thunder joins the applause and heavy rain begins to thud on the tent.

Alix

takes Ione's hand and together the two acrobats run out of the tent and into the rain. They begin to smile, to giggle, to laugh uncontrollably. Alix collapses onto the ground, mud getting all over their clothing.

It's over, they think, they've done it again. Each time they think it will get easier but it never does: to stay in the same place with so many eyes on them like these expectations hidden behind colorless pupils. Like a flash back to the people who Alix knew before— well, not *knew* because *knowing* wasn't something that happened until the circus— but those eyes that watched Alix before, and those hands that touched them when skin against skin felt like burning or freezing or maybe just stone, hard and grating—

But this, now, was so different. Ione's hand in Alix's, chosen to be there, this thing built on years of learning that holding themselves together sometimes meant falling apart, falling, falling like drops of rain, and knowing she was there to catch them.

Ione

finds herself pulled along and can't help laughing with Alix. I love you, she thinks. She breathes in deeply the smell of the rain, feels it nesting on her hair and her eyelashes as she gazes down at Alix, covered in mud, still convulsing in giggles.

She used to think this would make her feel weak. It doesn't. It makes her feels strong. She's always known she can carry another person. She's good at that.

She was never any good at letting anyone else carry her.

Jamin

opens his arms toward Kaede and asks, “May I?”

And with her nod he hugs her, like he did Ione after her first performance and Nova after his first performance. He’s lived with this so long it’s become his lifeblood, but he can see in the others’ eyes how it drains them sometimes. The need to present. It was strange, he thought, how even though so few people really watched anyone but themselves, some sense of structuring, of comparing, permeated everything. The sense of outcastedness due to a name, to coloring, to pronouns. And then in the circus to present your body for others, in acts of open rejection of what was allowed for it to do...

It’s a lot, he knows. It’s a lot.

Nova

cannot let go of the silks. He holds them close, as if they can hide him from the gaze of the crowd.

They can't, of course, and he is used to this. At least during performance it is expected; but after, he never knows what to do. The silks seem much safer company than the groups of strangers. Their familiar contact helps sooth him.

He reaches up, splits the two silks so that he holds one in hand, and lifts himself back up into them. After a couple quick, inch-worm climbs, he transfers all his weight into his arms so that he can hook the silks around his feet. He slowly lowers himself down, guiding the silks so that they secure his feet, and finally he releases into an upside-down hang. He swings slowly, a human pendulum. The blood begins rushing to his head, and the rush allows him to stop thinking about everyone watching. He simply hangs there, swings.

And catches a pair of light brown eyes, upside down, watching him. A child, maybe of eight or nine years. The child waves, or at least Nova is fairly certain that's what the motion is— it looks odd from this angle.

Nova reaches his hand up— well, down— and cautiously waves back.

Kaede

thought that it had all been for her— sitting in the train car with Ari, practicing the Cyr Wheel, learning to be with the group, it had all been about changing *her* story. A dare.

As she hugs Jamin back she looks over his shoulder at the people remaining in the tent. She can't stop staring at the ones who are still holding hands. She never saw people hold hands before.

And she realizes it's not about what it does to her, it's about what it does to everyone watching, all of these people who have forgotten how to listen. How to speak. How to dare.

Selene

feels her heart begin to hammer and her feet begin to move. The fear for some reason always hits her after, rather than before. She lets her feet guide her as she runs away from the tent, from the compound, between the trees, stumbles, picks herself up and keeps going, until gasping she drops to her knees and breathes, breathes, turns her face skyward and lets the rain wash away the sweat and the fear.

The circus is her family, her home, and yet somehow the only time she feels completely herself is when she's on her own. She knows that the way things are can't remain. She has talked to Zandre more than most— asked, rather, and listened— and she knows that people were not always this way, not will they be always whatever they become next. This strange isolation in proximity, it cannot self-perpetuate. People are fewer. They are losing their sense of where, when, why, how, who they are.

But it is not lost, not yet.

And out here, in the trees and the rain, on her own, Selene can feel it in herself: a past vaster than she knows, families— communities— greater than she can imagine, stories that are not lost, not yet.

Zandre

knows the breaking storm is just the beginning.

Such heavy clouds carry more than rain.

And what was missing is more than this.

There is something waiting to be found, here.

They have almost reached it.

It is small, and it is not going to change everything.

Not at once.

Ari

does not step out into the rain. Not yet.

She watches the crowd, watches the forces moving among them: the Daredevil whispers in their ears the dangers of opening their mouths, of willfully looking each other in the eyes as they speak. But the Acrobat is strong here in this moment; Ione and Alix's performance left its mark. People are speaking, tentatively asking questions they have not thought to ask before, extending hands and offering touch.

The Juggler swirls people around, creating small groups that morph as individuals move in and out. Some run into the rain pouring down outside the tent, others huddle close to the fire. The Jester leaps around in playful giggles and snorts and guffaws, especially amongst the people gathered near Jamin, who is telling the story of his first attempt to juggle fire.

The Contortionist is more subtle; Ari can see the force's simple presence in the bodies around her. Such a small group, yet consisting of bodies short and tall, dark and light, rounded and angled, and everything in between.

The Bard, the Dancer, and the Puppeteer soak up the energy and disseminate it again. Ari watches as Nova teaches a small child how to climb the silks, half-holding them up as they wriggle and cling with hands and feet. Everyone is bolder after this performance, as if the years in between have not led to forgetting but to longing. There is something building here, new performances being imagined.

The Watcher is present, as ever. Ari smiles as she recognizes the Watcher peering out through her own eyes, even as she feels the impulse of the Ringmaster guiding her gaze past the fire, toward the opposite end of the space.

At the back of the tent there is a shadow waiting. The others have not noticed.

Ari rises slowly, letting her cane carry her weight. She feels the years more than she lets on. Her movements are slow, ginger, after sitting so long. Step by step she shuffles toward the far end of the tent.

She stops just short of the shadow, rests on her cane.

The shadow speaks. "Ariadne. You came back."

You

walk out alone into the rain, to the wagon, to the box where you know Ari keeps the old puppets. One by one you take them out of the box, pull the strings, watch them dance.

Afterward

This project has definitely morphed in several unexpected ways, as I suppose should in fact be expected of a creative project. It began as an exploration of circus stories in different genres: I wrote one section draft as a graphic novel script, I played around with writing a song to go along with one piece, and I sketched out pictures of a few characters. It quickly became clear, however, that the strongest pieces I wrote were the ones that came naturally in prose, and given the time constraints of a thesis I decided to focus on and develop these short pieces. Rather than short pieces complete in themselves, I found that the world I was creating fit together more like the start of a larger piece (perhaps a novel). It is fragmented in many ways (and in fact I used “Fragments” as a temporary title as I worked on the sections), it involves experimentation with styles of writing and perspective, and it tells stories which directly address the themes of storytelling while in many ways resisting the very expectations of storytelling it sets up: in fact, the Enchanter might say “This is not yet a story.”

I wrestled quite a bit with the (lack of a) central conflict in this piece, a struggle which I think arose largely from my interest in rejecting a more dramatic, plot-driven arc in favor of small moments and snapshots of the characters and their lives. This is perhaps where my piece is the weakest in its current form; I feel there is something which it is trying to reach in terms of profundity and engagement in small moments, and yet does not quite tap into fully. The characters, while they have become more and

more clear in my mind, are not yet all fully realized in the work, and the reader does not get as strong a sense of them as I would like. This is a world in which I want to showcase the importance of contact and connection, especially in apparently mundane or insignificant instances, and while I begin to engage with that in compelling ways, I think that is something I will need to continue to develop.

The final paper that I wrote for my senior seminar on empathy and affect in post-apocalyptic fiction heavily influenced my thesis work. I had not originally planned on working within a post-apocalyptic setting, but as I wrote it quickly became very evident that this genre was important to my work. I did not want to confine myself to the norms of the genre, steering somewhat away from focusing on the typical horrific aftermath(s) of an apocalyptic event. What I found this setting emphasizing, however, was a sense of cyclicity and of rebuilding, reworking, relearning—something which I think writing itself is very much based on, and which many pieces contend with as driving themes. For instance, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* has had a huge influence on me since I read it in Contemporary British Literature. Mitchell plays with genre, including the post-apocalyptic, and he uses the very form of his novel to mimic the circular nature of both time and writing itself.

In my seminar paper, I argued that both Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and TellTale's video game *The Walking Dead*, though they use different forms, "require active engagement from the audience and it is through their function as affective narratives that they challenge the audience to participate in the creation of a new system of meaning." This active audience participation is something I sought to include

in my own work, using inspiration from such works as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, in which Egan uses second person voice to narrate the chapter of a particular character. The "you" which arose in my work both is and is not the reader; they are someone who has entered into a world that is not their own, surrounded by people who are different from those who surround them, and offered the opportunity to participate in this world and create something of their own.

One of the other struggles that arose while writing was the embodied nature of my subject matter, and the difficulty of using words to describe circus acts. In my final paper for the 290 English Seminar, I wrote on the mind-body, masculine-feminine dichotomy addressed by Zadie Smith in *On Beauty*. I spoke about Judith Butler's theories of performance and performativity in regards to gender, arguing that the character Kiki "must struggle to rediscover and redefine herself with the understanding that mind and body, masculine and feminine, are more vast and more connected than they seem." This theme became particularly relevant in my writing about a literal performance, especially given that several of my characters are never explicitly gendered (Alix, who uses they/them pronouns throughout the piece; Zandre, who is not referred to by any pronouns; and "you," who is referred to only in the second person). In Judith Butler's work, performance is something that everyone recognizes as an act, and is not associated with the authentic self of the performer. Performativity is what we do every day as we use verbal language, body language, and our actions to construct our own identity. In circus, I find these lines seem blurred.

Part of my interest in exploring these ideas through a circus troupe is due to the way that in our world, circuses often present alternatives to the traditional social structure. Gender theorists might refer to what circuses do as “queering.” When used as a verb, “to queer” means to shift one’s perspective outside of normative discourse and challenge the conventions and expectations surrounding it. In mainstream culture, a circus artist is often called a “freak.” By bringing to the forefront the extremes, oddities, and differences of humanity, circus necessarily addresses Otherness. I think it is fascinating to explore what happens when this becomes the central communal space, when the oddities celebrated by the circus become the “norm,” the basis around which a communal identity is built. As I envisioned a future world in which the gender binary is no longer such a prominent social force, it became essential to include explicitly queer identities.

Writing a creative thesis has been far more difficult for me than writing an analytical thesis. In analyzing other stories, I’m able to take the part of the active reader: I’m thrown into a world, encouraged to play around in it, admire it in all of its complexity, and find the most intriguing ambiguities and questions to draw out from it. The act of creating such a world is, at least for me, far more difficult— but it brings up powerful questions just as easily. I chose to do this because I wanted to be de-centered, I wanted to confront the nature of storytelling in a more intimate and personal way than I can solely through close reading. I cannot say I’m fully satisfied with what I have written, but the process has led me to reexamine much of the work that I’ve studied as

an English major in search for the impulses that drive the writing, for what holds the reader, for *how* the words create the world.