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Margaret and the Wanderer

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Margaret and the Wanderer // Lucy Graham

There was nothing I could do to stop the tide. It just broke and broke and broke, and while there were bodies floating on the surface, I wasn't particularly upset by them. I could see their ivory skin, the general swelling of their forms, and the sway of their hair with the sea's rhythm. I was thankful to be witnessing their slow approach through the dawn rather than a black, vacuous night like the one I'd just sat through.

Actually, the terror came from the fact that I was alone on the beach. It was just that current and me, and like the ticking of a clock I knew I would never silence it. The bodies were washing up and I was listening, standing this communal ground on my own. None of these people in the water could help me.

I took in the tepid breeze—there was the scent of my vomit, and salt, and a million other organic things I would never know—and just then I felt something else, a brush against my ankle, soft and warm and so light it was little more than a tickle. I looked down to find a familiar beagle I'd seen around town. There was an elegance about her: she had thin legs and a long, freckled snout, and her giant black pupils stared up at me, dark and vast as the formless cosmos. I stooped and stroked her satin ears, letting her lick my wrists and sniffle up my forearms so she could find out for herself who I was.

As she examined me I searched her face and eyes for a name, hoping her visage would strike some chord within me and tell me what to call her. And then, after a moment or two, I said, "You're a Margaret. There's no question."

I stood back up and observed the seascape once more, yielding to the sickening cadence of the current and facing, unmediated, the nasty truths they held out to me: my sisters had harpoons in their sides and stomachs, while my mother's was in her neck and my father's in his chest. They were things now, like the hard sand beneath my feet, and the

flaccid saline seaweed scattered about, and the dead purple toenail that was peeling from my right big toe. I'd identified all of them but buried none. I told myself the crimson ocean would swallow them up just fine, or else the sun would boil them back into the earth from whence they'd come. There was no role for me here.

I'd searched the town for others, but I'd found no one. Somehow I had dodged the catastrophe, and somehow so had Margaret the Beagle. I'd done nothing special, only sat and sweated in the dark until morning. But now, lucky me, here I was standing upright on the shore.

"Margaret," I cooed softly as I turned away from the sea. She looked up at me, probably not responding to her new name, but rather to me, the sole voice in this void. "Let's go." I picked up my heavy brick feet and began walking inland, back through the thick grasses and still further, into the shadowed tangled woods at the edge of town. And all the while a cadence of quick, light footfalls played beside me, each a steady and recurring insistence that I was not, in fact, the only one.