

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

How to Cite: Salemi, S. L. D. (2021) Novel Excerpt: *My Side of the Ocean*. *Gothic Nature*. 2, pp. 316-329. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: March 2021

Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a fully anonymised process.

Copyright:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access: *Gothic Nature* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

Novel Excerpt: *My Side of the Ocean*

Shelby London Driscoll Salemi

'Humans have defined Plants and Animals harmfully, as things, and it's time we undefine Them, unknow Them to know Them anew'.

Broadcast 1

Dear ReOceaner Network,

When you're in love, it's harder to want to flood the desert and all of humanity. Mama Beth's words. My name is Flora. I am not in love. I am certainly not in love with Planet Earth, at least not in a selfish way like my Mama Beth. Mama Beth and I are not close, not just because I'm averse to her Insect touch due to my having been patched with Sensitive Plant, but because my Mama Beth is a narcissistic Humanist. I am a ReOceaner being held as a potential threat by the Humanist-controlled nation-State of Califas and I can hear my Humanist Mama Beth giving Her selfish confession to the State Prevention Department to get me out of this grey, windowless cement holding tank. Maybe you're a new ReOceaner, and not familiar with me yet. Maybe you have only recently realised that the only penance humans can do for extinguishing animals and ruining the earth is to die by the sea level rise we have caused. Most of us are on the coasts. All we have to do is break the seawalls we are constantly reinforcing. I can hear Mama Beth's message even without my cybernetic web imPlant hardware, which Fauna ripped from the port under my ear when he put me here in the slammer.

Mama Beth's confession doesn't surface from the web with a sound or handwriting signature for me. I'm just feeling it. That's how I know I'm not hearing it via my connection to the shitty non-capitalist internet. Nor am I in turn transmitting Mama Beth's words to average Califas People with State web imPlants. I'm not entirely knocking the unsponsored, unguided

‘organic’ wifi browsing experiences that, as you know, Califas’ secession from the former U.S.A. left us with, but my transmission is more organic, more under the radar. Mama Beth and I are special. We can bounce our messages off of Gelata, no wifi needed, because we share Gelata’s glow. I’m no technophobe like Mama Beth. No, I just know that what we should really be afraid of is the organic.

f.

Chapter 1. To Mollusk.

CALIFAS STATE PREVENTION DEPARTMENT AUTOMATION: BEGIN RECORDING. For the record, state your name.

BETH: Beth Graves Santos.

CALIFAS STATE PREVENTION DEPARTMENT AUTOMATION: For the record, state your charges.

BETH: Homicide.

CALIFAS STATE PREVENTION DEPARTMENT AUTOMATION: Begin your speech act, granting permission for the Prevention Archive to record by saying START RECORDING, making your speech act admissible as evidence in court at your trial by a jury of Califas Persons, until which time you say STOP RECORDING.

BETH: START RECORDING. My name is Beth Graves Santos, for the record. I give My permission for the Prevention Department to record and listen to this, my confession. I am confessing my culpability for the 2070 murder of Beaded Man in exchange for my estranged daughter Flora Santos Healy’s release. Today is the twins’ birthday. Flora should not have to spend her nineteenth birthday in a dank, solitary holding cell, her only crime being her nature as the offspring of Mermaid, a once-famous ReOceaner. Fauna and Flora, I know you’re

listening. Fauna, I know you're listening because you're the State, a warden for the Nation-State of Califas. Flora, I know you can hear me in your heart. I will not spare any detail. I know the State will mine my speech for keywords, but Fauna and Flora, and any jurors who might take the time to peruse my recording beyond the keywords, and who might find any of my words redeeming, I want you to hear it all. The State is holding Flora because of her affiliation with the ReOceaners. I am confessing because I have a second chance to save my family. I killed Beaded Man, an old Beat poet and Re-Oceaner, because Beaded Man was a perceived threat. Califas, don't condemn my daughter for being a perceived threat. My daughter is innocent.

When you're in love, it's harder to want to flood the desert and all of humanity. Even though this is the story of Beaded Man's sacrifice, this is also a story of apocalypse. However, apocalypse is usually gradual. It's hard to put a finger on apocalypse, a time stamp, that is, unless there's an event. It follows that because apocalypse is usually more than one event—rather, apocalypse is an accretion—I, Beth, must tell the whole accretion. Too bad I'm not Jackfruit Tree. I'd rather tell this story in rings, letting the rings' thicknesses speak of drought, hardship, abundance, symbiosis, Deadness, chop.

Beaded Man's sacrifice occurred a decade ago. An old ReOceaner friend of Mer's, Beaded Man was acting as the children's tutor at the time. Indeed, I strangled him with my daughter Flora's legs. Immediately afterward I helped Mermaid, my now ex-wife, place Beaded Man's brain inside Conch Shell to satiate the curse on our family. This is not the only event I must tell to get to the bottom of what went wrong. The accretion of this apocalypse begins with love, my love for Mermaid.

Broadcast 2

Dear ReOceaner Network,

It's gratifying in a way to hear Mama Beth say that she killed Beaded Man. I've believed she was the culprit for two years now. But I wish Mama Beth had had the guts to confess to my face.

My wooden pencil scratching my notebook echoes in this tank as I write. My writing implements are not internet conductors, not seen as a threat by my pollutant of a brother Fauna, a Califas State Preventionist, who personally locked me up. Fauna is probably also the one who locked Mama Beth up when she turned herself in. These archaic writing implements are my pillow and blanket, my bread, my final record. When the ReOceaners break the seawall and this place floods, my words will float to the sea floor with all of the other debris and fossilise, even if the State has seized them first.

Ask yourself, 'did I experience a tic (insert your personal tic, which your arisings from the wifi cue for you) before this, Flora's story, arose in my body?' You couldn't have. Because I've been unplugged and I am broadcasting this naturally. If you are reading this, you are reading a fossil record, before it has calcified. If you are reading this, you are actually just hearing it in your brain and body, and are plugged into the organic internet, via your patch or your evolved attunement, like the Firefly to the other Fireflies, the rhizome to the root, the glow of the Gelata, and like me and Mama Beth. I write these words to you, who might hear my story.

I am transcribing Mama Beth's confession to the State Prevention Department as I hear it, the words Mama Beth is speaking with such special emphasis that they reach me through the thick cement, meant to block signals. I transcribe Mama Beth's confession because it is rolling my head.

f.

BETH (CONTINUOUS RECORDING): I was a shopgirl when I first met Mer on the night Mer gave Her speech at the Museum. I had been working retail at the San Diego Natural History Museum. I was the buyer for the gift shop inventory. I sourced trinkets carefully, to make sure

they were already well-loved. This was before California's secession, and therefore before the State ban on all new merch that you all are familiar with, but the local anti-consumerist culture was already so strong that nobody wanted newly-manufactured merch as souvenirs. All the wares in the shop were antique, recycled. All the goods for sale being trash went with my Humanist religion, so I was good at my work. I was coming out of a dry spell with my new job at the Museum. All the Detritus around me was stimulating me. I felt on display, too, a part of the natural history exhibits.

Mermaid was at the Museum for her art opening. As the designer of full bivalve Shell-shaped sea vacuum, which as you know has since bolstered the sea trash harvesting industry, and She being a ReOceaner to boot, Mermaid's reputation had preceded Mermaid's opening. Mermaid had worked with engineers on both the sea vacuum's outside aesthetic appearance and the vacuum's internal workings, both of which mimicked the morphology of extinct Mollusk and Mollusk's mantle. I had known Mermaid would be at the Museum. The topic of the vacuum was creating a buzz in the Imperial Beach community where I lived, the same Imperial Beach where this first sea vacuum would be installed inside the sea wall that held the waves back from flooding the South Bay again. I was considering going to hear Mermaid speak, but my feet were aching, so I was on the fence about attending. I hadn't known Mermaid would come into the museum shop.

I was polishing the glass counter when there Mermaid was: tall, long dark hair, tight plaid pants, perusing the children's section. I knew Mer's image from the Museum promotional poster, 'Artist Unveiling of Sea Vacuum: The Woman Behind the Imperial Shell'. The Museum's propagandist apparently tried to design a different type of poster—it was eye-catching in its oval shape—but the propagandist couldn't escape Scallops and Woman in shades of sand. The propagandist had rendered the poster in tan sand and the 'Flesh Red' of an eighteenth century colour taxonomist. I knew, because I spent breaks soaking in the faded colors of the Werner's Nomenclature of Colours exhibit.

The exhibit took the form of a waterfall fountain alongside the main staircase. Werner's exemplary ornithological specimens perched on a cascade of plaster boulders and dusty, plastic

and silk flowers in red, green, and blue. This Werner, who'd been a mineralogist back when his camp considered as mineral species Shells and fossils alike, had considered this 'Flesh Red' a 'Human' colour, whom a Scotsman Flower painter later elaborated as the mixture of 'rose red mixed with tile red and a little white'. We had the flower painter's colour atlas in the gift shop. Though it was for sale, I kept it behind the counter, for my personal perusing. This 'Human [really a blushtastic white skin]' color, This faded Flesh Red, was the coloration that saturated Mer's Flesh on the poster. Though the poster didn't centre Mermaid's image against the tan Shell, I couldn't see the Aphrodite thing and not be curious. We should all be curious about the most blatant of symbolism.

Mermaid had held an artist's residency at the Museum for weeks before Mermaid constructed her vacuum prototype for the opening, but I had never seen a trace of Mermaid in person until tonight. Mermaid had this sunken treasure look from the start, with her long, messy, wet-seeming hair, weighty and excessive metal jewelry, and her smoky oils. Fragrant Juniper oil, in fact. She smelled like spice. Like a new species. Mermaid had Conch Shell tucked under one armpit. Conch Shell was adult Queen Conch Shell of Caribbean origin, which Mermaid usually toted like a purse. When Mer held Conch, sometimes Mer was at Mer's most artistic, most alive, and sometimes, when Mer held Shell, to the point of trance, Mer took on a Dead quality. As Mer shopped that day, Mermaid was clutching Fuchsia, for sale, which hung from beaded brown macramé webbing.

I tried to act nonchalant, arranging Puka Shell necklace under the glass counter, thinking of what I might say to a ReOceaner. Jurors, you might think it weird that a fellow Humanist fell for a ReOceaner. I hadn't spoken to many that I knew of, not that I wouldn't, but I guess I put out strong Humanist vibes. (For one, I did carry my Humanist drinking mug at my belt). So ReOceaners probably tended to avoid me, god forbid we interact. Contrary to popular belief, speaking with a ReOceaner does not make me a ReOceaner sympathiser. Falling in love with one did not make me wish death upon all Humans after a thousand billion Jelly stings to empty our Human lungs of their last screams, like a hard ReOceaner might wish. As I arranged the necklace, Mermaid walked to the counter and stopped, quite close to me, only the glass separating us. I looked into Mermaid's face, and heat rose from my inner thighs, apparently to my

cheeks. Mermaid didn't look like She was made of Roses and tile, as on the poster. Mermaid's complexion put the Pale Canary Bird in Primrose Yellow. Mermaid wore no makeup. I sensed Mermaid's cool undertones.

Mermaid set Conch Shell down with a glass-against-glass clink. I got a better look at Shell, Mermaid's curse and muse. Conch was light brown and tan on top, with eleven whorls, and Rose Red on the lip leading to a magenta deeper into the aperture. Mermaid also set Fuchsia down softly and leaned onto the glass case. Her dark, wavy hair fell into Fuchia's soil and flowers but Mermaid didn't seem to notice or care. I occupied my nervous hands with Puka Shell necklace. I fiddled with the smooth, uneven disk-shaped Shells on their plastic strand as if They were a rosary. My aim was to drape the necklace perfectly over a small piece of driftwood next to some Mother-Of-Pearl earrings. Mermaid watched me. Then She slapped her hand down onto the case as if the glass counter were a tambourine. I jumped.

'Your cheeks are glowing iridescent', Mermaid said to me.

At that, my cheeks got even hotter. I withdrew my hand, still clutching Puka Shell necklace. *Be smooth, Beth*, I told myself. I slid the flimsy aluminum backing of the counter closed and dropped Puka Shell necklace into my apron pocket.

'Have you ever heard of blush', I said.

'Glowbaby', Mermaid said, in a velvet gargle.

I was hooked.

'My name is Mermaid', She said. 'But you, shopgirl, can call me Mer'. Mer didn't extend her hand. I wanted to touch it.

'Beth'.

‘Whatever you say, Glowbaby’, Mer said. ‘Are you staying for the unveiling? I’m making some remarks. Then I’d love to buy you a free glass of champagne’.

‘Yes’, I said.

I took forever to process Mer’s payment for Fuchsia. Then, Mer left to prepare for her speech. I no longer cared about my aching feet. I was the closer, but I left tasks undone around the shop. I would be surprised if I had remembered to lock up before rushing to the opening. Though I was in my thirties when I met Mer, I felt like a teenager, crushing.

I made a stop in the powder room. Indoor toilets were no longer at the Museum. The Museum had opened outdoor outhouses, considering the sewer problems plaguing California. So the bathroom was truly just a powder room. Just Silver-gilt mirrors and defunct plumbing. For an institution that housed countless carcasses, I wasn’t surprised that the institution couldn’t handle a shit smell to go with the carnage. Museums are unreal, clean, displaying sterilised matter. Sewage was too real. Realer than long-past mummifications, the skins scraped clean of flesh.

The mummies all had placards from decades previous, maybe the 2030s, saying ‘The Museum is working to return these remains to their places and peoples of origin’, but the repatriations had never happened. At what point on the timeline had returning plundered body matter and artifacts been too late? And there were no such placards on Animal specimens. Just on Cochineal-dyed pots, Grass baskets, shrunken heads, bones. Therefore, since the Museum had stopped short of its goal to repatriate Human art and bones, I had no hope that the Museum would get around to considering to whom Animal specimens belonged. I supposed Animal specimens, in come cases pelts wrapped around nothing, around a robbery of innards, belonged to Animals’ former Selves.

I freshened up in front of the grand mirrors. I removed my apron and set it down next to the sink. It made a soft thud, like Fox laying down in a clearing. Puka necklace was still inside. I had unintentionally borrowed the strand of Pukas. I put Pukas around my neck and twisted the silver fasteners together. I powdered my face with minerals, lest I blush again. In the mirror’s

reflection, my Scarab-green blood vessels (my colour, not Werner's) were showing through my see-through paleness. I moved the purse-size powder brush over my cheeks and down into my dark circles in half-moon strokes. My paleness was Greenish White, like the 'Vegetable' 'Polyanthus Narcissus', according to the nature colours display. I often thought of my own colour when applying makeup, when feathering out the binaries of green and white that played on my skin with a brush and homemade pigment, the palette tending towards a darker green under my eyes. 'Feathering out the binaries', was some advice a wiser woman had given me once. Helen, the doulah who'd assisted at my own birth and whom I was still in contact with, had said, 'well, Beth, as you're feathering out the binaries, you will find your way...' Helen had assumed I would succeed in this pursuit of feathering out, but as far as I could tell, I kept the words of the sage inactive in my makeup bag. *Tap, tap.* The sound of my brush on the Museum's marble washbasin, to shake the dust off. I steadied myself against the counter and took a final good look in the mirror.

My comparisons of my complexion, and, now, much that I saw, to the tints of obsessed long-dead color namers was like a psychedelic trip. The names of the colours were so delicious. Due to my genetic Firefly patch, I had always been prone to dissociative reverie, to the point of hallucination. Shapes and colours sometimes slipped me into these dreams, and sometimes stressors induced the hallucinations. It wasn't unpleasant for me. It was an escape. Because I knew the peace of dissociation, I knew why the ReOceaners fantasised about a clean-cut end. But because I dissociated, I knew the ReOceaners' desired end was selfish, irresponsible, and anything but clean-cut.

Cheeks chalked, I walked to the Great Hall. The cavernous acoustics were already picking up Mer's softly deep register. She was testing the air with a 'check, check'. I sensed Mer's spice smell acutely from my position across the space. Mer stood in front of a screen, and just behind her on stage right was, presumably, her sea vacuum prototype, draped with a white sheet. Mer began her short speech, during which She held Conch Shell in one hand and gestured wildly with Conch Shell:

To classify a Self means to make secret what one could have seen crawling all over, in broad daylight, maybe even in one's own kitchen. Just over 200 years ago, literature man

Edgar Allan Poe famously abridged The Conchologist's First Book for schoolboys. My great grandfather was one of those schoolboys, and he began a line of naturalists within our family, ending with me. Today it is my express pleasure to be here to celebrate our transcendence of such Latin naming practices and the horror of the laboratory techniques that their champions like my great grandfather and grandfather after him performed. I have donated the family tome, my great grandfather's copy of the textbook, an early edition with colour plates, to the Museum. From its pages I drew my inspiration for the design of the sea vacuum.

The cover of *The Conchologist's First Book* appeared on the screen behind Mer. Its spine was a deep forest green. The yellowed paper bearing the one-tone inked cover art was old and yellowed as a treasure map. It was torn in two places near the spine and the paper was wearing thin near the page edge of the cover, so that the green leather shone through in splotches. The title was centered in the ether, which was the suggestion of a sandy dune, due to the pillars of foliage on either side of the title capped with Willowy dangling tufts of Plant, and a few landscape lines sloping downward a long ways to the precious specimens at the bottom of the printed engraving. A Land Snail at the upper left of the bottom quarter of the cover image invited the eyes downward towards the glassy pool of a lagoon, on the beach of which the naturalists' prized specimens clustered. The Land Snail hit me hard as emblematic of my own identity, from stories my father told about those delicate creatures on Whom the Fireflies I am patched with fed. The Lagoon looked like the Salt Marsh outside my apartment in Imperial Beach where Jaca Tree lived. This idealised lagoon image, a place of fantasy where specimens, diverse, docile, and uncontaminated, pose together. The Land Snail was the only specimen with a body, at least a visible one. Perhaps other Shells on the book's cover engraving had been cleaned or abandoned, or had retracted their bodies deep within themselves. Nine Shells were pictured in total. One of Them in the image was conical and pointy, One orb-like and paper thin, and Two spotted, shiny, and thick, but I didn't have words for Them. I hated not knowing the names of Selves. And I hated how relatively uneducated I was compared to this woman Mer. Strange that the centre of the design should be a hole, as if sucking the viewer in. At the centre of the specimens was the horizontal aperture of white oblong star-shaped Shell. After much silence, affording me this long gaze, the screen went white again, and Mer continued.

As you might have heard, yes, I am a ReOceaner. But what you may not have heard is, I, a ReOceaner, practice the Unnaming. I practice the Unnaming my way, due to my experience with the naturalists, and with a few caveats, all of which I won't go into now. I don't practice the Unnaming for Humanist reasons like you might—that is, I don't believe fellow Animal Species have the potential to become deities simply because They die out, when humans extinct Them. When I write about Animals, I don't omit articles and capitalise Animals' common names and pronouns in order to increase their intrigue, or to group entire Species into singular, allegorised beasts. Quite the opposite. I capitalise Plant and fellow Animal Species' names to pit Them better against the primacy of humans even in the realm of speech, of text. And I omit Animals' and Plants' articles because articles denote things that are about to be defined, or that have previously been defined. Humans have defined Plants and Animals harmfully, as things, and it's time we undefine Them, unknow Them to know Them anew. Plant and fellow Animal Species are knowable and rightful equals to humans. Humans should not exalt Them in name, nor should humans purport to know Species' qualities just because science has compiled innumerable data sets on Species. Humans have taken for granted the scientific documentation of Species for so many generations that we have lost touch with Plant and fellow Animal Species.

I have said all of this about my manner of speaking with regret for not having been able to unknow Mollusk before humans extincted Mollusk. We humans face the impossibility of Unnaming Mollusks before their extinction, as They are already considered extinct. Compounding the insult to Mollusks' memory, men like my forefathers extracted Mollusks' bodies from Mollusks' Shells in order to draw Them into their atlases. From my grandfather's anatomical drawings, you can see that there's a respiratory chamber that houses Mollusks' gills. My sea vacuum design includes gills, just as with the former body of Conch. Though instead of breathing, the wavy gills will take in and filter trash from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. In the absence of the inner bodies of Mollusks' Selves, let us at least fill an empty Shell in Mollusks' extinct Selves' honor with trash, with the pollution we humans have cast into the sea.

Calling all Selves by their common names, in the manner we call each other by name, is only a grammatical, end-of-days afterthought, but it's my belief that such utterances are a spell towards knowing the Selves that remain extant in this climate. It's an incantation we can all take up in our mouths and ears and brains daily. To Mollusk.

In her short speech, Mer had radiated idealism—strange for those nihilistic ReOceaners—and I needed hope. I needed danger, too, as I felt somehow that the only antidote to apocalypse was stretching the limits of apocalypse's terror, and finding pleasure as I threw myself at the walls of terror's isolation chambers. I was afraid. I had seen the grey seawall go up as a child; I would soon see the wall against the Former U.S.A. go up and the wall against Tijuana crumble only slightly; a wall of sewer was threatening from beneath; and the vacuous blue sky was no escape, was even worse than a wall, because it reminded that the end of humanity via ecocide is not a clear stopping point like the surface of a wall. I threw myself at clear stopping points, to see if they would hold. There was pleasure in terrors, tangible objects of fear. Museums play on this pleasure all the time. A fling with this woman Mermaid, this prominent ReOceaner, forbidden to me because of Humanist social pressures against sympathising with ReOceaners, because of the principles I supposedly stood for, the survival of Humans, the most vulnerable of us first and foremost...well, a fling seemed hot.

Mer was captivating from the beginning, and not just when Mer flexed and jiggled her muscles, for instance later on when She moved into my apartment, installing our claw foot bathtub over shag carpet, or fixing up some other artifact from a hundred years ago, Mer and I patting down the housePlant soil together, biceps grazing waxy leaves. But Mer also captivated me when Mer flexed and jiggled her intellect.

And tonight, Mer's speech was such a flexion of brain. Mer finished speaking those last words of her speech, *to Mollusk*, with an orator's flourish, raising Conch Shell high above her head, to which the museum patrons all raised their glasses. I clinked my glass with the nearest strangers to me, and drained it, then set the glass and myself down on a marble pillar to shine like a gem-coloured Beetle from a bowing blade of Grass. Would Mer come over here? I smoothed

my sweater and hair. And Mer, ever impulsive, did come over. Mer bolted over, never mind the line of Museum members who clearly wanted some face time from Mer. Mer took my hand. Mer's was cold and bony extending from her mess of metal bangles. Mer's hand and fingers felt like sexy relief against my hot plush palm. Mer grabbed two champagne flutes at the open bar, without exchanging any words with the bartender. Mer didn't tip, only winked. Mer led me through the thick nautical roping beyond the crowd—we both clambered over it—towards the hall that led to a life-size marshland diorama.

When we arrived with soft footsteps, the false morass was dim, as if broken, but the Museum intended such murky non-lighting for this diorama. Mer and I stood on an ornamental footbridge, gazing over the resin pond of dark blue-grey at the taxidermy subjects, stuffed Waterfowl. Modern colour systems derived from ornithology. Naturalists preserved 'representative' Birds, in part to act as swaths in color taxonomies, but these preserved Birds' mortal forms had all faded. In their pious objectivity, collecting holotypes of all birds, the taxonomists had dulled the all of the colours in their collections. You can't preserve living brilliance.

The colour of the fake pond, conceived in a tint of Prussian Blue perhaps to reflect Mallard's speculum, that blue beauty spot of green-necked Drake and dull female alike, now covered with the grey of grime and age, reminded me of the brackish water of the marsh near my apartment, on those days when me and my father would wait for a wind to pollinate Jackfruit Tree. On those days, I would look at my reflection at a low point, and the water's quality would lower me deeper. Some false Greenish Grey Grasses, Cattail and others, grey as the 'quill feathers of the Robin' according to the taxonomy, grazed my ribcage. Me and Mer were alone in the fake former world. It was cold as dust.

Mer poured Her champagne onto the pond of paint. I glanced at Mer sideways and smiled. 'To Death and Detritus', I said, and followed suit, pouring out my glass to Mallard Deities, so that the liquid would trickle Mallards' way, maybe even float Mallards. My utterance of the Humanist prayer was my way of telling Mer my religious affiliation up front. As you know, good jurors, we Humanists (I doubt the State will have consciously selected Humans among you with any

dissenting ideology) have little scripture other than this prayer. I said the prayer whenever I jinxed or hexed. I said it to give thanks. I said it to punish mySelf for falseness. I said it all the time.

Waiting for Mer's response, I let my eyes skim female Mallards' feathered form. The taxidermist had set female Mallard upon the fake water stretched out, in a forever nod-swimming courtship pose, legs stuck in solid pond like a perverse lollipop. Mer was taking Her time. Would Mer acknowledge what I had said, my admission? Finally, She did.

'You dirty little Humanist', Mer said.

I smiled. Mer made me feel more rebellious than I was. Mer was public with her ReOceaner identity, a bold and dangerous move. In contrast, I wouldn't have dreamed of going public with the most dangerous facet of my identity, of being patched from black market Firefly.

Now, I allowed myself to take in Mer's female form. Her body was angled over the railing of the pond. She leaned with such attractive ease and confidence.

'Come to my studio?' Mer said.

BIOGRAPHY

Shelby London's poems have appeared in *Spiral Orb* and collaborative chapbooks, and her translations have appeared in *Alchemy*. She does contract work in writing programs at UC San Diego and UW Tacoma and co-teaches a summer class for youth called *Language and Identity for Bilingual Writers*.