

SARAH BLACKMAN

The Blue Key

One day, an assortment of people went walking by the window.

It was clear as the sea foaming crisp at the base of the white cliff, this was a procession.

I am a curious girl. I was born for obsessions.

Wiping my hands on my apron, I left the baking table strewn with flour, herbs, oiled bowls of rising dough.

The loaves murmured disapproval from dish-towel cloisters. On my apron were two white handprints, so I left it at the door.

I am a curious girl. My mother tipped me back and forth to watch my eyes slide open, shut.

The women in the procession wore their hair like sculpted seashells.

The men wore mitts as if to protect their hands from an anticipated heat.

I fell in toward the end of the line. We skirted the cliffs.

As a child, it took me a long time to recognize myself in the mirror. I was startled by how my teeth betrayed my skull.

Some people had sewn pouches into their shirts in which they carried their animal familiars.

A cat, a monkey, a bat sleeping with his wings folded like a steeple in front of his eyes.

I am a curious girl. My father bound my hands behind my back and tipped me into the shallows.

The mood of the crowd started to change.

Some women dabbed at their eyes with handkerchiefs pulled from their towering hairdos.

The men produced bouquets of kelp and sea grass from behind their backs.

Before me the procession parted. I craned my neck to see.

We were at the town square. The familiar cobbles, the yellow café, the hibiscus opening their tequila throats for inspection.

Someone had built a bandstand.

Someone had hung an archway with anthurium, each petal like a waxy plate waiting for the dessert.

My little kitchen seemed so far away. My baking table like a raft adrift and the sorrowing dough searching for a horizon.

Under the arch was a tower—a man, his beard like a hurricane, bells swinging from its cumulus. An orchid pinned to his vest.

I am a curious girl. My favorite brother put his fingers in my mouth and under my tongue left a ring and a key.

The crowd began to sway from foot to foot. The crowd began to clap.

The cat picked up a ukulele, the monkey a mandolin. The bat flew to a tympanum and patted a sleepy rhythm.

They made a music like water sluicing through sentinel rocks.

It took me so long to recognize myself in the mirror. By the time I looked again, it was too late.

The crowd pushed me to the front, many hands at the small of my back, under my skirt, feeling for purchase.

The bearded man took the ring from under my tongue and slipped it onto my finger.

I am a curious girl. My sisters went before me. Their dresses were mailed home, mended and neatly pressed.

All my loaves were lost at sea. They sank to the bottom, dish towels shadowing them like rays.

SARAH BLACKMAN

When a storm brews over the ocean, I recognize my face in the whipping
waves.

All that is left in my mouth is this key.