

MOUSE TONGUE

Zoe F. Gilbert

They did mice in the first taxidermy class. Four hours from snake food to whiskered gentleman, the teacher promised, holding up a bag of frozen mice in one hand and tiny plastic top hats in the other. They giggled, but were soon absorbed in cutting, peeling, stuffing.

Such new knowledge was exciting to Frances. Now I know how to skin a mouse, she thought, I could do something bigger. A rabbit: no problem. A cat? The tail would be different, but the principle the same. Her mind scaled up – piglet, swan, deer – finding ways around snouts, wings, hooves as she went. She looked at her own hands. Fingers would be fine; toes simple. The difficulty with a person would likely come at the head. She hadn't liked pulling out the mouse's tongue.

Around the classroom, students manipulated their misshapen mice into poses, adjusted heads and limbs gingerly. Frances imagined herself with seams along inner arms, the backs of her legs like stockings. Nobody would know if she made discreet improvements, tugged in her waist a little tighter, was generous with stuffing at the bosom. The teacher had shown them how to fill out the mouse's cheeks by inserting cotton wool through the mouth or eye sockets, so cheek bones would be easy. She would put her stitched self in a balletic pose, elegant, and give herself a wistful look with glass eyes in forest green. She would feel funny without a tongue, but it was necessary, the teacher said. Otherwise it rots and starts to smell.

The mouse's tongue had been long, resistant, like an earthworm extracted reluctantly from the soil. Her own would be

like an eel, a thick pink curl, which she pictured pickled in a glass jar. Her mouse listed left on the newspaper sheet in front of her, loose limbs akimbo, wires protruding from paw pads. Nobody spoke to her at parties now, but her stuffed self would be enigmatic in its silence, aloof. Ever since childhood she had wanted green eyes.

IN THE GROCERY STORE, DISCUSSING PAINT

Shellie Zacharia

They stood in the produce section. He said the color name should not matter. She disagreed. She said she didn't want to think about winter mist where they slept, made love, read the books piled on their bedside tables. She pulled another card from her back pocket. '*Iris-in-Bloom*,' she said. 'It's a bit more purple than gray. I like flowers over fog.' 'Mist,' he said, 'not fog.' 'Exactly,' she said. He shook his head and picked up a bag of tangerines. 'It's just a name,' he said. 'You won't remember it years from now.' He was right, but she wouldn't admit it. Their tangerine hallway was not *Tangerine*. She had no idea what it was. 'Get the clementines instead,' she said. She pulled another card. '*Endless Sky*. I like this.' It was a color that would dissolve walls, make her feel as if she could fly. He smiled and pulled at his beard. She loved him. 'You can join me,' she said. 'But be nice.'