Madeliene Kaye
Centre of the Ribcage

A fine-tooth comb is made of lines upon lines. The point of one such line is softly dragged over a scalp. This movement disturbs a story that some may assume ends, maybe with a mother, or an un-beating heart. The comb turns from vertical to horizontal. Palms push down halves either side of the parting. The comb's teeth feed through one of these sides, making equal segments of uneven, wet strands. As the comb pulls, a tangle is revealed with a jagged movement. A spot of shame blooms on a turned away face. Fingers flit away from the comb's handle, smothering the knot to loosen it. When the obstruction is unravelled, the comb takes up its path again, going down, down the uniform lines it creates, away from the centre.

The floorboards were not arranged with a centre in mind, those lines were cut and placed in deliberate, overlapping pattern. A centre was only chosen when the chair was placed there, promptly before a mother ushered a small body to sit. If asked, the mother would not say that she placed the chair there because she could not bear the empty space, but you would know that is why. This truth quickly becoming apparent as the fine-tooth comb is raised, a point dragged, and another heart yet exposed.

There is a vertical line drawn inside too, between the bodies' whalebones. It helps protect the muscle we also call a heart, along with the ribcage strings that grow from it.

The comb bites into the small body's scalp, catches a hair and forces it out of the follicle, causing a pained inhale. The little thing can't hide how it upsets them, but the pain of it is okay. If the small body wants to hear songs sung in the room with golden flags, emerging lines must be inspected. But it makes the metaphor loosen into reality; a sternum disturbed by a piece of once-ivory plastic. A hair, and it was a hair, falls to the floorboards.

This form is exposed with a monstrous swish, the sun quickly travelling away from it. A sailor sighs at the thought of a pest. The sun continues moving, a yellow line across his eyes. A line like all lines, moving through the years with an ease that recycled wood does not know. The sailor is practical; he has to be. A hair is not a rat tail just because he mistakes it for one. The planks of this ship are not the same as the floorboards underneath a mother's chosen hairdressing chair. Shapes mistaken at the borders of the dark are not all Ships of Theseus waiting to be misunderstood. Some are just dust.

A Ship of Theseus suggests an ending where dust doesn't. Instead of a philosophy trying to determine a before, a crossing, and an after, choose a dusty story that repeats in on itself, goes backwards and forth, orbits the centre constant, never quite collapsing.

The first segment complete, the mother crosses the heart to the other side to continue inspecting. She's silent but proud, because many things come from

or become dust; mountains, molehills, rug piles. Forms made by the sweep of a brush. Artistry and practicality call for chores, as does being at the bottom of the pecking order.

When the ribcage rocks and the water seeps, cleaning never gets a body further than meditation. In the near dark, the bristles of his broom find lines by stroking the grooves of the planks.

Following those lines like stubble against a shoulder bone, going upwards and along the throat's chords, to an earlobe. A light beam falls godly from the clouds, through the cracks. It finds him yellow and woozy. Inside the ship's creaking stomach, the tracks of bad music lie like strings from classical dreams. A warm saltwater drip thumb presses a heart between eyes.

A wheel turn, a tongue pushed in, an eyeball rolling; a change of course forces the light to relinquish bodily planes. With cold eyelashes, the sailor catches a tail shrivelling into hair in the light, floating dust motes whisking it away into the dark places underneath the cannons. Above, groaning ropes go taut and straight.

A child sometimes becomes a body under the weight of holy water carried in the mother's pocket. Not the sailor's body, not the sailor's mother. Bodies can be recycled like waterlogged wood cannot, resisting lines, retold like bibles and playground rhymes, circling and circling and singing *duck duck goose*. What gathers in the dark cannot fear the lines of an embroidered skeleton sitting at the end of the bed, threatening funny death.
To repeat, to orbit, to circle; the sailor is not the small body, not here, not now, not even if his absence suggests an empty border. It is not yet time to explain why mothers may have a compulsion to drag heavy legs to the centre, where there was once a heart.

The small body sits on the chair, feet hanging, one socked foot barely reaching the uneven floorboard. The point of a fine-tooth comb, made to reveal the true centre of things, draws. Small bodies, smaller than the small body even, hidden in the spaces between, are caught in the comb's teeth, picked out and scattered on the floorboards. They circle the lines that approach hearts, fluttering between the lines of a house's ribcage. Soon, they will be swept away with a sighing brush. But breathing does not begin here, exactly, with mothers. It begins with bodies and dust.

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