In every story in which there are two sisters, one is always prettier. One wants the world served up on a platter while the other longs for nothing more than a rose. My sister, Huley, was the pretty one; you'd think she would have been selfish as well, but I was the one who was greedy. I wanted things I never should have begun to imagine I deserved. I was an ugly girl who lived in an old white house with my father and my sister, but in my mind I was something more. I read books as though I was eating apples, core and all, starved for those pages, hungry for every word that told me about things I didn't yet have, but still wanted terribly, wanted until it hurt.

My mother had named me Violet, most likely because of the blotchy thing on my face, a birthmark in the shape of a flower, blue in cold weather, hideous and purple in full sun; when the heat made me sweat the mark stood out more than ever, bumpy and blistering, filling me with shame. My mother was kind-hearted, but she died of a fever when I was seven and my sister was only five. I liked to think she was leaving me a blessing when she gave me such a beautiful name; I believe she assumed my pretty sister had no need for anything more than a name that would have suited a mule.

I did most of my reading in the barn, where our horses were kept. I thought of books and hay together, a single sweet parcel. There was no line drawn between the soft snuffling of houses breathing and the glorious worlds I most likely would never see. I read Greek myths. I read about far off places, Venice and Paris. I read about men who searched for things they could not find at home, and women who fell in love with the wrong person and waited for the arrival of their beloved for so long that a year was no different than a single day. The same thing was happening to me. Years were passing. I was already a woman, and I still wasn’t done reading. When my father and my sister went to sleep, I would sneak away from the house, taking a lantern. The
horses didn’t startle when they heard me. They were used to me. Maybe they enjoyed the sound of turning pages; maybe it made the taste of hay rise in their mouths. When I stretched out with my book in the pool of yellow light, I could hear the hum of the bees in the hive perched on the crossbeam above me; a thousand wings flapping in unison, and I’d think I’m alive. I’m alive.

Our father was a fisherman, Arthur Cross, a good man, worn down by the sea and by the loss of our mother. He was often gone for weeks at a time, off to the Middle Bank, between Cape Cod and Cape Anne, along with his helper, a boy named George West. This year, when they came back from fishing at the end of August, George West had grown nearly a foot. He was rangy and silent and had blisters all over his hands. George was nineteen, a year younger than me, but he towered over our father. Although George barely spoke, and couldn’t seem to meet my eyes—perhaps because he was afraid of the mark on my face—my sister and I were relieved that there was someone to help draw in the nets, someone our father could rely upon. When there was fishing nearby, runs of herring and bluefish, my father and George worked in our bay. Huley and I shucked razorfish and clams for bait. We harvested salt meadow grass to feed our horses and the three dairy cows that were kept in the field. Books weren’t the only things I knew: I could imitate the song of the redwing blackbird that always announced the alewife’s run. I could place a single blade of eelgrass between my fingers and whistle so loudly the oysters buried in the mud would spit at us. Still, all the while I was out there laughing with my sister, a straw hat on my head to protect my blotchy face, I was thinking about the barn, about books, about the yellow lantern light.

Before long, I had read everything in the schoolhouse, including The Practical Navigator, and had borrowed whatever I could from the lighthouse keeper’s wife, Hannah Wynn, who had inherited a small library of books from her father in England. It was Hannah Wynn’s husband, Harry, who first saw the serpent and filed the official report. Harry Wynn had been a surveyor for the county and trusted observer of the coast for many years. Tales of sea serpents usually turned out to be whales, or large seals, or banks of curly seaweed, tangled and thick. Surely, there were strange things in the water; our own father had told us of a night when the ocean around his boat had turned green, as alight as the stars in the sky. George West had been a witness to this as
well, if anybody dared to doubt our father's word. As for Harry Wynn, although he wasn’t as honorable a man as our father, he wasn’t a liar or a madman. Not in the least. People listened when he reported that the sea serpent was nearly fifty feet long, brown in color, snakelike in form, stinking of sulfur. Harry had watched the creature crawl out of the ocean, and sure enough, when the men in town went to inspect the beach the next day, there was a trail in the sand, nearly four feet across. The smell of sulfur was palpable. Several men dropped to their knees, then and there, to pray for forgiveness, for deeds they did not care to announce or explain.

One day everything was the same, the same sky and sea and beach, and the next day it was another world entirely. People saw shadows where none had been before. The women in town panicked. Most would not let their children wander freely; cows were brought in from the field, in case the creature had a taste for meat or milk; windows and doors were secured. An article appeared in the Boston Post, with quotes from Harry Wynn describing in great detail the size of the sea-serpent's teeth, nearly four inches long, and the way it had looked back at him, before darting into the woods. By then, my sister refused to go to the shore with me, though it was only a mile from our door, so I went to dig up bait by myself. I wasn't afraid. I had read the Odyssey and I knew there was no way to escape your own fate. I knew that every monster had a beating heart, even those with scales, even those with flame-hot breath that could light the eel grass on fire, even those whose faces were too terrible to see.

On the day the Professor arrived we had what was called a neap tide, a tide lower than usual, so that the bay seemed devoid of water. I could walk miles out into the sea and find nothing but mud. There were enough littlenecks and quahogs to fill two wicker baskets. Before me appeared a world without water, and it buzzed with mosquitoes and gnats. It was September, that golden month. My straw hat made everything seem yellow; the mud, the sky, the sulfury shoreline. I saw the Professor from a distance, and, yes, my heart stopped. No one believes it when people say that, but in my case, it was true. It was just for an instant, but it was an instant I understood. Thank goodness I was wearing my hat. Perhaps he saw me a beautiful as he waved from the shoreline, my body young and strong, my hair in one long braid, nearly to my waist, my ugliness hidden by straw and sunlight.
His name was Ewan Perkins and he was one of the curators of the Harvard Museum of Natural History, a naturalist, originally from London, who had written for such esteemed journals as Zoologist and Scientific America. He was an expert in unusual creatures: giant snakes in Bolivia, a small breed of crocodile discovered in Oxfordshire, Mexican frogs that could not only climb, but fly. These things I learned later, just as I learned he preferred toast with jam for breakfast, and hot, thick coffee when out in the field, but when I first saw him I only knew he was perfect. He was waving to me from the shoreline, accompanied by two men from the town council, Vincent Dill and our mayor, John Morse. I blinked, but if I wasn’t mistaken the stranger held a book in his hand, a natural history of Massachusetts, at least three hundred pages thick.

“Well, that’s a foolish thing to do,” John Morse told me as I approached with my baskets of clams. “You’ll likely be eaten up in one snap if you’re not careful.”

“Unlikely,” the Professor said. His voice went through me, as a hook might have done. No one in our world spoke the way he did, with such certainty and such clarity that a single word rang like a bell. “If the creature left the salt water, it’s most probably looking for fresh water instead. Are the ponds in this area?”

I kept my head down so he wouldn’t see my face. So I’d have a few more minutes of him thinking I was beautiful. Through the straw of my hat brim I could see that his eyes were some strange pale blue. I was done for, I knew that. I was trapped then and there.

We had half a dozen kettle ponds in our town, bottomless, with cool water, and probably score of small ponds, like the one at the rear of our property where the cows grazed on the water weeks that made their milk turn faintly green in the bucket.

“I know where you can find every one of the ponds, even the hidden ones,” I said in a thin voice. “I could show you.” I was acting as though I had very little patience and even less time and would perhaps do him a favor if it suited me.

“She’s a smart girl,” John Morse said. “You could do worse.”

I owed John Morse my allegiance forevermore after that, and would go door to door when his term as mayor came due, asking my neighbors to reinstate him. The professor said he would meet me in the morning in front of the schoolhouse; the mayor would lend him a
horse and Vincent Dill would take him in as a boarder to his fine house which had a grand view of the bay. I looked up then, and if Professor Perkins was shocked by my face, he didn’t show it. He was used to monstrosities, after all, curious as a matter of fact. He gazed right at me with those blue, blue eyes, and for an instant I felt unusual rather than deformed. Something to be studied, understood, learned.

I didn’t care what my father said, I went to meet Ewan Perkins so early in the day that there was still a sprinkling of stars in the sky. I took the horse I liked best, the one I called Swan. Swan was ugly and old, but steady. I was so dizzy with what I was doing, I needed something dependable beneath me.

Ewan Perkins was waiting when I got there—he had one of the Dill’s horses and a jug of black coffee, along with a satchel of charts and equipment and glass specimen jars. We started out down by the lighthouse, where the creature had first been seen. I was wearing my straw hat bent low over my face. I could hardly breathe when we stood close together and walked along the sand. The marks of the sea monster had been washed away with the tides, but every once in a while Perkins would bend down and extract something from the sand, using a large tweezers. After an hour, he had found several scales, rather large and brown as the mud. I was fairly certain they were the scales of a large bluefish, turned color in the sun, but I said nothing.

“Do you think monsters are a figment of man’s imagination?” Ewan asked me. The sun was coming up and he had offered me some of the coffee, still warm. I drank it and felt I was floating. I watched the stars evaporate into the lightening sky. Who was I to say what men might imagine?”

“There are always authentic abnormalities,” I offered. “And if it’s part of the natural world, it is by definition, natural.” It was brave of me to say, even braver for me to look at him straight on, not hiding what was wrong with me.

We went to the larger ponds, one after the other, five in all, and as we went along I told him the names of the species of trees he had not seen before, common things, like pitch pines and locusts. The mulberry trees brought from China he recognized, for he had been to China once. There he had seen a flying squid, which arose from the waves like a raven, as well as a two-headed fish that could keep one set of eyes closed while the other blinked open and shut. He might have been to...
China, but he hadn’t been to the cape before. Things here were new to him, and therefore, interesting. I told him about the white crow that nested in our woods, a ghost bird people called it, but I’d collected four feathers and they had proved to be entirely corporeal. I pointed out the tracks of a red fox, the thickets of winterberry, green as we passed them, but scarlet in the dead of winter; I told him about dragon’s blood, the crystallized tree sap we used as a dye for quilts and dresses. He started to look at me in a manner I recognized: it was the way I looked at a new book, one I had never read before, one that surprised me with all it had to say.

We met each morning for three days in a row. I learned to be quiet while he looked for samples. He was looking for tracks, scales, half-eaten gulls or terns, any bit of evidence. I drank hot coffee. I didn’t bother with my hat and let my braid of dark hair shine in the sunlight. I walked through the mud and pointed out bullfrogs. I drifted salt out on logs, hoping to entice the sea monster into coming forth for what it must naturally need, the essence of what it itself was, the dregs of the salty sea.

My father had every reason to be angry. I didn’t care for the cows and they cried pitifully in the evenings, so that my sister, Huley, had to go out in the field to do the milking, even though she was afraid of the monster. I forgot my errands, my chores, my life; the horses waited in their stalls for me to come and read by lamplight, but I didn’t appear. In time, Ewan put his hand on my arm, then my shoulder, then my leg. He kissed me when I wasn’t expecting it, and then when I was. I thought about water, I thought about salt, I thought that every monster who looks at his reflection in pond water sees only the black movement of the water and the pinpricks of starlight from up above.

What happened was my fault, of course. I should have let him go at the end of the week when he said there was not proof that the sea monster, if it had ever existed, was anywhere to be found. I thought of all the places Ewan had been, and all the places he’d yet to travel to, and the way he had held me close and lifted up my skirt. When he was with me, he always put his face against mine, not afraid to touch me the way others were, as though I was poisonous. That morning I went to the harbor where George West was already at work on the nets. I knew there was a huge run of bluefish. By noon that day the bay would be swarming with the bluefish chased schools of mackerel inland to their death.
“Don’t tell anyone you saw me,” I said.

George nodded and as soon as he turned away from me, I collected the bluefish scales that had washed up on shore. I held a match beneath them, singeing them slightly, so that they turned brown and sulfury, almost like burnt feathers, there in my hand. When I turned to go I saw George West looking at me. He had been working so hard on the nets the bluefish destroyed in their frenzy that his hands were bleeding.

“I’d wager Harry Wynn didn’t see anything come out of the bay. He had nightmares, and he wanders at night. I’ve seen him myself. Barefoot in the snow screaming at things that aren’t there.”

“Do you know a lot about things that aren’t there?” I asked.

“I know a bluefish scale when I see one.”

This was the most I’d ever heard George West speak. I wasn’t particularly interested in hearing more. I went right up to him, close, even though I was stinking of sulfur and fish.

“Promise you won’t tell anyone.”

Why did I think I had the right to ask that of him? And yet he seemed to think I did, because he nodded. I ran off before George could change his mind. I wasn’t sure he knew exactly what he had agreed to; I wasn’t certain myself. I rode all the way to the Dills’ house with mud on my skirts and the sulfur clinging to me. I was thinking about George West’s bleeding hands and the way people did strange and desperate things and I got myself more and more worked up. The sun was burning hot and my face hurt the way it did sometimes, as though something was stinging me, as though bees were under my skin.

Mr. Dill brought me into his guest room where Ewan was already packing. There was the smell of lemon in the room, and of coffee, and of mud. I had wrapped the scales in my shawl which I now laid on the bed. I watched as Ewan unwrapped them and I nearly fainted with nerves. I thought about his hands on me. I thought I could make a lie into the truth.

“Violet,” he said, and I wanted to shout out Yes, yes, it’s me, I’m alive! But I looked at the floor, as though I was frightened by what I’d found. I let the story out slowly; I knew from all the reading I’d done that was the best way to tell a tale, start far away from the center, but know where that center is at all times. For me the center was the way he was looking at me. He got overheated just hearing about the tracks I’d happened upon on our property. I said that for the past two days our
cows had been dry; something with a taste for milk had been feeding from them, then slinking back into the murky waters of the little pond at the rear of our farm, crushing the last of the mallows, and the duckweed, and the plummy milkweed, whose feathery pods were beginning to rise into the air whenever the wind came up. Then last night I had found the scales. They were so full of the serpent’s sulfur they had burned my hands. I showed Ewan the charcoal edges of my fingertips where the match had spat at me while I was holding the scales of George West’s bluefish over the flame.

Ewan unpacked his trunk right then. I helped him if the truth be told. Perhaps Mrs. Dill, who was watching us from the hallway, thought this was overly familiar, but I didn’t care. The story had a center and this was what it was: Ewan Perkins and I rode out to our farm that very day. We were there before supper. It was the time of year when the sweet peas have their last wild bloom. Our cows were crazy for them, and the milk they gave was especially sweet at this time of year. There was dust rising up from the road to our house, yellow dust on the clapboards, milkweed spinning across the fields. My sister, Huley, was out with the cows, trying to get them to follow her home, and she was golden as well. Her yellow hair fell down her back; her arms were bare. Even though I had seen Huley every day of my life I could still recognize how beautiful she was. I didn’t look at the way they stared at each other when I introduced them. I thought Ewan would laugh when my sister talked about how afraid she was of the monster, how she wasn’t surprised in the least that it had wound up in our pond, it had probably been drawn to our property by the strong fragrance of the sweet peas. She heard things at night, Huley admitted, like a whispering, like the sound of scales dragging along the meadow. You idiot, I wanted to say, that’s me, reading, turning pages, being alive, but I didn’t say anything. I stood there thinking that sweet peas had no scent, at least, not to me.

My father wasn’t happy with the idea that Ewan would set up a camp on the shore of the pond. He didn’t offer coffee or supper the way the Dills had. My father wasn’t the sort of man who was pleased when a reporter from the Boston Post came to see the campsite Ewan put up—a tent and two kerosene lanterns and a little boat borrowed from John Morse. Soon enough, a story appeared announcing that a Harvard naturalist was convinced he would soon have proof of his
monster right in our town. Already, he had found unrecognizable tracks in the weeds, headed toward the cows. There were whiskers—plucked from the muzzle of my horse Swan, and singed with a match—that had recently been discovered in the shallows of the pond. Surely, no fish, not even the catfish at the very bottoms of the muck had whiskers such as these, which was why Ewan kept them stored in a glassine envelope. I was happy to row out to the center of the pond and sprinkle salt on the lily pads. I was happy to sit by the shore as a lookout far into the night. Sometimes, Ewan kissed me, but it was different and darker and I let him do more to me all the time. I wanted him to; I put salt on my skin to draw him to me. I thought of him as I used to think of books, the thing that could make me other than myself.

I grew tired from the hours I was keeping. Up in the middle of the night to tend to the cows, then trudging through the winterberry to throw the milk away in order to claim the serpent was feeding in our field again. Making the serpent’s trail with a snowshoe and a shovel that bent down the yellowing stalks of sweet peas. Gathering scales from the last of the bluefish, which would soon disappear from our bay; it was the end of the season, after all, and the bay was colder with every passing hour. Wrapping my arms around Ewan until I all but disappeared, until the only thing that was left was the thing on my face in the shape of a violet, the sort that lasts only a week or two in the spring.

I overslept one day, and after I’d pulled on my clothes, I ran down to the pond. I realized how much time had passed since Ewan had first come to town because the Coot had begun to migrate, flying over town as they did every October. Things weren’t so yellow anymore, except for my sister’s hair. She had brought him coffee, and maybe she had been doing that for some time. There was nothing wrong in that, they were merely talking; it wasn’t like the way we were at night in his tent, so feverish I could feel the salt rising on my skin. I could feel the mark on my face stinging with the thousands of bees that were inside me. It was something else entirely, the way he looked at her as he drank his coffee. I ran back through the milkweed. I had a hundred pods of it in my hair and stuck to my clothes, not that it mattered. I went upstairs to my bed and stayed there. I didn’t come down for dinner, I didn’t milk the cows, I didn’t do the work of my deception that Ewan had so come to depend upon.

My sister brought me soup, but I spat it on the floor. My father
came to my bedside, worried, but I didn't even look at him; instead, I stared at the patterns of shadow on the wall. Ewan came for tea in the afternoons. I could hear him asking how I was, but I could also hear the tone of my sister's voice. After several days I had a strange visitor, one I wouldn't have expected. It was George West, bringing me an apple cake that his mother had made. It was the time for apples, and the cake smelled good, but I turned my face away. That was when George West gave me the other gift he'd brought.

"I won't tell anyone," he said.

I looked at him then and he quickly looked away. This time I didn't think it was because he was frightened by my face. I saw what he'd brought me: Three bluefish scales, perfect, larger than any I'd seen before, already singed at the edges, sulfury and brown. I got out of bed then, even though I was only wearing my nightgown, and hid what George had brought me in the back of the storage bin in the wall. I was careful so as not to tear the scales; they were delicate, really, beautiful things. When I turned around George was gone.

I kept the scales in storage, but I didn't look at them again. I could smell them, though, the salt and the sulfur, tinged with the scent of apples from the cake on my bureau. That night I dreamed about bluefish. I dreamed that I was far out in the bay, in a world of water, at the very edge of the map. I dreamed someone I didn't recognize was drowning and there wasn't a thing I could do.

That afternoon Ewan Perkins talked my sister into going out to the pond. He must have been desperate for proof of something, and she must have been desperate as well. She was afraid of snapping turtles and bullfrogs and hornets whose sting could bring down a horse. When I followed them to the pond I realized my sister looked like a splash of milk, a pool of sunlight. What a relief that must be to a man used to monsters. She was laughing, but I could tell she was scared that the serpent might be lurking somewhere close by. Among the many things Huley was frightened of was the water; she'd never learned to swim. Now I remembered that after our mother died I used to sleep in bed with my sister. I would promise her that her nightmares weren't real things. It was only her imagination, and she seemed to accept that as something less important, less powerful. Ewan was reaching for a water lily, the Egyptian sort, something yellow and glorious to present to my sister. He probably had no idea they were as common as weeds in our
pond. Surely, he had no idea of how easy it was to trick a man, even one who was so devoted to zoology and nature.

My hands smelled like fish scales and sulfur and apples. I hadn’t bothered to braid my hair and it fell down my back, heavy and hot. I heard something in the sky, and I looked up, thinking it was some of the coots, traveling south, but it was that white blackbird, the one I saw now and then. I had never really found any of its feathers; I’d only said that I had. I kept walking toward the pond, pulled there it seemed. I went right up to my sister, and I pushed her, hard. She tipped right over, in a single splash. The water was deep right away; she’d been standing on a bluff, the place where the milkweed grew. For an instant there was nothing. Not a sound. Ewan was standing there, looking into the water. His skin was so thin I could see his veins.

I jumped into the water after her, and the cold was a relief. My dress billowed out like a cloud, like a lily. I put my arms around my sister’s waist. She smelled sweet. I remembered that about her. I wondered what it would be like to go where she was going, to walk the streets of Cambridge and London, to be waiting while he traveled, searching for things he’d probably never find. I saw an insect walking across the water, a small miracle, perhaps, but a miracle all the same. I thought I’d just keep the fact of its existence to myself, or maybe I’d ask George West if he’d ever heard of such a thing, if he might happen to know its name, if by chance he’d ever seen one himself.