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"The Department of Love," "A Field Guide to the Underworld," "Surgery"

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The Department of Love

Walk by the Department of Love tomorrow. Hundreds of jilted lovers are lined up along its pink facade. In bandages and crutches and slings. Anxious to file a complaint. They scribble their names. List the defects of their most recent lovers. Then spit on the paper to seal the deal. The guards know most of them by name. And take bets on when they'll return. There go a few victims now. Limping out the back door. Along the lilac hedge. They pause between two naked statues. The yellow-haired woman flips her hair as if to flirt. The tall baritone lets out a booming laugh. They chat a while. Then she reaches for his hand. And writes her number on his palm. It all seems so promising. But if we go strictly by percentages, they'll be back in line by Tuesday.

A Field Guide to the Underworld

Scroll Ten

This is the final scroll. The one where the young demon perfects a dozen disguises. Then sets sail for the land of the living. The ancients found his exploits amusing. They loved to hear about the time he tricked Aphrodite into removing her gown. And crawling into his bed and sucking on his toes. Or the time he dressed up like Zeus and strutted around Olympus when the king was out pretending to be a swan. Or the time he gave the Cyclops back his eye and pointed him west toward Ithaca. For his last official act, he loosened the bolts on Vesuvius. And let the lava flow. The scroll ends with him sailing back home, a thousand trophies in tow. Though the Christians claim they caught up with him along the coast of Africa. Tied him to a stake. And set fire to him. And his bright red boat.

Surgery

I am happy they are here. In their long gowns. Their white masks. Like bandits who can’t keep from doing good. They spread their silver tools out on the table. As if some ritual were about to commence. Now I won’t have to cut into myself. And pull the rotten parts out. Excuse me while I retire into my ether. Where everything smells like home. And people speak in hieroglyphs. Their fingers are probing inside me now. Caressing one organ. Nudging back the next. A kind of intimacy I normally do not allow. But this is an exceptional case. And I must be a good host. Just now they have paused beside a dark pool. Like explorers lost in the territories. One kneels, cups his hands and samples the waters. The others wait. I’m the one looking over their shoulders. Holding the banner aloft.