

Osceola

Sitting at the only table outside the corner cafe, Osceola Slint moved his spoon around his coffee mug with the tip of his finger. He was looking upwards, past the club-clawed branches of the curbside tree, to the interweaving hex of wires. The waitress knelt by his table.

“Can I get you anything else, today?” She had pale blonde hair, a few strands of which were piercing the holes of the iron-mesh table as she bent to speak with him. Osceola took no notice. He shook his upturned head. “Alright then. I'll bring you the check,” said the waitress.

The club-clawed tree swayed slightly in the gusting November breeze. The ends of its branches, sawed and thickened, trembled like bludgeons in reluctant hands. Osceola continued to shake his head.

“A goddam shame” he murmured.

“What's that?” The waitress turned, her hair sweeping across her face.

“Them trees,” He said, his words seemingly directed upwards. “Its a goddamn shame they way they stub them up like that. What the hells the point of a tree like that. Doesn't give any shade, doesn't even look like a tree anymore. Why not just cut em' full down,” said Osceola. The waitress gave the tree a passing glance.

“Yeah they sure aren't much to look at anymore.” She returned her gaze to the older man and shrugged, “but I suppose it's better than them tangling up all those wires and cutting everyone's power.” She paused for a moment to give the man a cheerful smile, but he didn't notice. She sauntered inside towards the register. Osceola sipped his coffee.

Osceola was named after a town. It was a once prosperous and booming town, which has long since disappeared. Osceola's father had named him in hopes of preserving the memory of the place, but from the time of Osceola's birth, the town had only receded further into obscurity.

It had been a logging town, full of saloons, residences, and several general stores. It was nestled in a wide, remarkably inaccessible valley. It was the sort of place you were proud of if you lived there, but

couldn't necessarily point to any particular reason why.

The town's one unique characteristic was that it had been the home of the Slint and Styles Theater House, a three-story structure with a facade of spalted maple. The Slint and Styles Theater House was a local legend, even long after it had fallen and its timbers re-purposed. One part theater, and one part circus, Slint and Styles was known for its peculiar and raucous performances. During one such production, a re-considering of *The Flying Dutchmen*, an albino hog had been harnessed and flown above the stage. In a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a skinned black bear was cast as Oberon and an actual donkey's head (preserved and hollowed especially for the occasion) was used as a part of Bottom's costume. The Theater House had initially intended to attract the high-class business of company representatives, but quickly became the disorderly haunt of the common man. It drew in the classic cast of small-town characters all looking for some diversion from the monotony of hard labor. Reviews of the Theater were very polarized; many patrons left with a macabre amusement, whereas others left shaking their head and muttering disdain.

Osceola's great grandfather had managed the place with a charismatic grin, and an unswerving commitment to deliver eye-widening peculiarity. It was the appeal of his character, as much as the oddity of the performances that contributed to the success of the Theater House. It managed to stay in business even until the end, when the surrounding forests were reduced to tinder-strewn wastes.

The shadowed, lush land that once housed Osceola has since swallowed The Slint and Styles Theater House, and the rest of the town entirely. The whole town is not merely abandoned, but disassembled, desiccated, and utterly forgotten about. Even the memory of locals in nearby towns seems mossed-over and vague. If you ask them to take you there they'll bring you to the vast field of hawthorns that was once Osceola, spit on the ground, and say "there 'tis."

Osceola uncrumpled a ten-dollar bill and flattened it on the receipt tray with both of his hands.

The mid-morning sun, shining through the mess of wires, cast a cross-hashed shadow on his empty plate. He rose from his seat and strode in the direction of the mostly-risen sun. As he walked, he peered into the shaded, reflective windows of Bartholomew Street. His face was weathered. He had the look of a slab of limestone: creased and scoured. The hairs of his beard shot down into a black cone with hints of gray. His face had a distinct pallor from being constantly shaded by his wide-brimmed hat. Looking into the black mirrors of the storefront glass, he felt sure that there were faces leering disapprovingly on the other side. He did not let his gaze settle deeper than his reflection to test this hunch.

This sense of otherness was not a new feeling. He always felt certain of the disdain of passerby's whenever he made his way through the city-streets. He took a different route every time, always hoping to find something in the city that resonated with some familiarity, some sense of belonging.

The glass storefronts glared at him to his left, and as he lurched forward, he struggled to keep his eyes positioned straight in front of him. He carried himself forward with an uncertain purpose, feeling his blood as if it were all in his feet, throbbing him onward. He squinted. An old wooden sign swung, creakily, just above his eye-level. He glanced upwards: "Bartholomew Taxidermy" it read. He furrowed his brow and reluctantly turned to face the oaken door. He stood for a long moment before entering.

Inside he smelled the musk of furs mingled with something sharp and chemical. The store was clearly old and mostly forgotten. A dusty oriental rug half-covered the waterlogged wooden flooring. The interior of the store was not much bigger than an average bedroom, and the taxidermist was hovered over a series of small pelts with the comfort of a man sorting his socks. There was a humble display of stuffed beasts in a few glass display cabinets lining the four walls.

The taxidermist raised his head to say, "Good morning, let me know if I can help you find anything particular." His high-pitched voice cracked a bit as he spoke, but he seemed wholly at ease. Osceola stepped onto the oriental rug and looked at his reflection in one of the display cases. Behind his reflection, a ragged squirrel snarled in stillness.

"Get much business these days?" He asked.

“Oh, not really, not much demand these days.” He said, running some metal tool across the skin of a skunk pelt, “a handful of hunters now and then.”

“How'd you manage to keep this place running, times as they are?”

“Well, the rent is cheap, and I'm fairly thrifty.” He paused for a moment. “... and I've got a bit of savings from when there was lots and lots of business.”

“Hmm, when was that?” Said Osceola, his thumbs wedged behind his belt-buckle.

“Oh quite some time ago. When fur hats were in fashion. *My* fur hats in particular. Sold them for days and days back then, even had hired help and adverts,” The taxidermist's eyes glazed over with nostalgia for a brief moment. “Fashions change though,” The taxidermist sighed, as if for emphasis, “best not to ride the ebb and flow of that fickle wave, not for a taxidermist anyway.”

“You made hats? Why would folks come to a taxidermist for hats?” Osceola had turned and was squinting at the old man.

“Well, mine were different than the norm. Special, something unique and stylish to boot. My hats had the ears or the antlers, the snout or the beak, something more than you'd get at the local haberdashery.” Osceola could tell the taxidermist was getting excited. He had stopped his work entirely and was shaking his foot a bit. “Would you like to see them? I've still got several dozen of them, they just don't sell anymore,” The taxidermist said as he flipped through a heavy-looking keyring. When he looked up to Osceola for a response, Osceola nodded and followed the man to the corner of the room where he was fiddling with a lock. “You see I keep them in here because people these days just want their animals stuffed and mounted... and they get a bit turned off at hats and other odd knick-knacks.” The taxidermist stood back and gestured for Osceola to go first into the closet-like room.

The room was brightly lit by white florescent overheads. It looked like a storeroom, but was more neatly arranged and organized than the room Osceola had just come from. Mahogany shelves lined the walls all the way up to the ceiling. Each shelf held an assortment of hats, made from the heads of different animals. A ram's head was staring up at Osceola from one of the lower shelves. As the taxidermist had

said, the majority of the animal's head was used in the hat, with the exception of the bottom half of the jaw, which was removed.

“Them hats? Them hats were popular among folks?” Asked Osceola in disbelief. The taxidermist frowned a bit,

“Yes they were. Now it wasn't everyone that bought them, mind you. Mostly the extravagant; actresses, street performers, gypsies, circus folks, opera folks and the like.” Osceola's eyes widened and he tightened his grip around his belt-buckle. Ever since entering the taxidermist's shop, Osceola had felt increasingly disconnected from his standard anxieties. As he listened to the taxidermist speak, he felt as though he were watching himself on some old black-and-white recording.

“How come you make them hats?” He said. The words seemed to come out before being decided upon. He felt like he was speaking from some pre-existing script

“Well...” The taxidermist began, nervously, “It's my life work, you know... and I like the sense that folks are out there feeling fantastical and extravagant on account of something I've made. People tell me all the time... well they used to anyway... that they felt a sort of 'magnificent peculiarity'” He emphasized those words as if reciting a holy text. “They said they felt that way wearing my hats out on the town. I suppose that's why I make them, or why I used to, anyway. Like I said, there's not much market for them these days.” The taxidermist lifted a half-smile towards Osceola, as if seeking his approval, but Osceola met his gaze wide-eyed and distant. Contrary to his distant stare, Osceola felt a certain sort of affinity for the old taxidermist. It was the sort of affinity one might have for a pristine antique.

“Alright, sure... But how come, if you're gonna be making them peculiar hats, how come you need to be using dead things. I don't mean any criticism, now, I just wonder. All sorts of things make folks feel peculiar and fanciful,” Osceola said, feeling the inquiry spill out of himself. The taxidermist took a long moment before responding. He had a look of concentration, as if he were attempting to recall the answer to a high-stakes trivia question.

“I suppose the easy answer would be something along the lines of well this is my craft and the

specialty I was designed for,' but that's a bit of a shallow response. That notion would suggest that I've always been good at my craft – I haven't been. It took lots of hard work and toil to hone this craft that I've chosen for myself. But why did I choose this craft in particular, is that what you want to know?" Osceola nodded, and the taxidermist paused again before responding. "That's not a question I've considered for a long time. I think I do this work because I find it has some profound import. It is a work of *essences*." He paused for a moment to let the emphasis of that word to settle. "I know that seems a strange word to use in regards to 'using dead things' as you put it, but the work of a taxidermist is returning the essence to a thing that has ceased it's living. Look at that cougar over there." Osceola followed the taxidermist's hand as it gestured towards out the doorway at a large cat on it's hind legs. It was poised and fierce in the florescent light that spilled out of storeroom.

"That's the definitive article right there – the archetype, the essential thing. It may be a 'dead thing' as you say, but it's retained it's... cougarness, in a way it never could have in life." The taxidermist stopped and took a long breath. "Well now, that was a very long answer to a fairly simple question. Did I make any sense?"

Osceola's eyes were still cold and non-committal, but had remained locked on the cougar.

"I reckon so" He said. "Folks used to tell stories about them cats, back where I'm from. Talked about 'em slinking around in the woods and being just behind you in your shadow. Never put much merit to them stories though. That cat though, looks just like I'd pictured 'em in my mind. The genuine article, like you said." The taxidermist smiled, revealing a row of yellowing teeth. He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his overcoat.

"Where's that... That you're from?" He asked

"You wouldn't have heard've of it."

"Well now, I'm fairly familiar with the small mountain towns around here. Mostly, it's hunters from those towns that still use my services."

"Osceola. That's where I'm from, where I was born anyway."

The taxidermist stroked his chin a bit and looked upwards, feigning some familiarity with the name. Eventually he admitted, “well you're right I haven't heard of it.”

“That's on account of it not existing anymore. I was the last one born there, named after it too – Osceola Slint” Osceola extended his hand in an abrupt and methodical gesture. The taxidermist shook it with a fragile grip.

“I'm Elijah, Elijah Bartholomew.” He gave another smile, but was met with the same statuesque gaze from Osceola.

“After me, it just got swallowed up – just another dead town.” Osceola frowned and looked back over to the shelves of hats. “I think I'll get me one of them hats” He scanned the rows, moving his gaze from left to right and then down to the next shelf. After some time he settled his gaze on a hat near the bottom shelf. It was a sheepskin hat with long flaps of fur to hang over one's ears, and like the other hats, it retained the facial features of the creature to whom it once belonged. This hat, however, was different. There seemed to be something wrong with the face of the creature. At first Osceola thought that perhaps there had been some error in its preservation, but upon further inspection he realized that the face was intact, exactly as it had been on the living sheep. The face atop the hat had three eyes, a strangely enlarged nose, and a second set of ears popping straight out of the top of the head. It seemed to possess a sinister sort of symmetry – as if two faces had been mashed into one. It dawned on him that this was the face of a conjoined set of twin sheep.

“How much for that one?” Asked Osceola, pointing at the bizarre sheep-face hat.

“Ah – isn't that one just wonderfully bizzare? Well unfortunately, as it is a one-of-a-kind, I'll have to have top dollar for it.” Elijah Bartholomew stroked his chin, feeling as though it had been a long time since he'd done any sort of bartering. “It's yours for three hundred. That's a steal.”

Osceola immediately removed his wallet from his back pocket and began counting bills. Without another word, he handed a stack of twenty-dollar bills to the taxidermist, stepped forward, and placed the hat onto his head. He stood for a moment, running his fingers along the soft fur that hung over his ears,

and then walked back into the foyer.

“It fits you well! Snug as a wool sock, I'd say. Good to do business with you”

“Aye” Said Osceola, distracted. He began to walk towards the door, eager to look at his reflection in the black glass of the shop windows.

“Before you go, Osceola,” The taxidermist began. Osceola turned around suddenly, his white ear-flaps flipping upwards. “I had a thought. It's... admittedly a bit of an eccentric notion. But I wonder if I might make a comparison. It struck me when you referred to your birthplace as a 'dead town.' I wonder if in some sense, you, as the last-born fellow of that town, are a sort of archetype yourself. If you maybe have got the essential character of that place embedded in your blood... you know, the genuine article...” He paused and frowned, struggling to articulate precisely what intended to say. “I guess I just feel like being a man named for a town that no longer exists, is a bit like being a well-stuffed cougar. And that both of those are, in some way or another, very special things to be.”

“I reckon so” said Osceola. Although there was no one around to notice the similarity, the smile that stretched across Osceola's face was the exact same smile that his grandfather had used while opening the blood-red curtain of the Slint and Styles Theater House.

That night Osceola dreamed of the theater house. It was dimly lit. It was also strangely lit, purple beams cascading off oddly reflective corners and a red light that seemed to radiate upwards from the floor. In the dream, Osceola was in a harness, strung up on thick hemp ropes. He was swinging like a pendulum from one side of the stage to the other. Red light bathed his face, then the shadows of the stage-edge, then the red light again. He felt his clothes billowing as he swung. Beneath him he saw a haphazard set on the stage; some stacked pallets, an artificial cobblestone path, and a plywood boat. On the deck of the makeshift boat stood a woman in a silver dress. She was watching him with a look of delight.

The dream swelled with color, and Osceola strained his neck to look away from the flashing red. He saw a crowd of people, some seated, some standing, all eyes turned upward, following his course through the air. The people were hooting and laughing. Osceola shook his head wildly. His gaze became a

jumbled static. He felt the sensation of something leaving him, and as his eyes focused he saw the sheep-face hat falling. It tumbled downwards, the ears pointing upwards. When it hit the stage, Osceola woke. He was startled by his abrupt awakening. As he squinted to recall his dream, an unaccustomed sense of fulfillment fell over him. The details of the dream seemed uncertain and vague, but what seeped into the waking world was a sudden and awesome sense of purpose.

The waitress had not seen the old curmudgeon in several weeks. She felt a sort of relief upon seeing him seated at the lone outside table. It was not because she felt any sort of affinity for the man himself, but because it was something reliable, something certain, that had been missing on the past few Sundays. She had wondered, albeit briefly, what might have happened to the man. She felt glad that she would not wonder that again.

The waitress was almost at his back before she noticed the odd hat the man was wearing. It was not quite white, and covered in ragged fur. She walked around to the opposite side of the table and knelt to take the man's order.

"It's been quite some..." She stopped, with her mouth frozen in a half-smile. She was squinting at the man's hat as if trying to decipher a puzzling piece of text.

"It's been a while," Osceola said, smiling. "I been occupied, you could say," Said Osceola, looking her in the eyes. The waitress was staring at the sheep-face hat. She opened her mouth to speak but closed it suddenly. She shook her head slightly, furrowed her brow, and looked at the man's eyes.

"What can I get you this morning?" She said with a practiced friendliness.

"Oh, just the usual" Said Osceola. The waitress had never seen him smile before, but he was smiling now. It struck her as the sort of smile someone gives you after you've finally admitted they were right.

"Still a coffee and the early-bird special with sausage instead of bacon?" She asked.

"That's right," Said Osceola, holding her gaze.

“Great. I'll be right back” She said, as she turned towards the door.

When she came back outside, the man was not at his seat. She looked blankly at his table and then down to the tray of food in her hands. She was thinking about what to do with the extra food, when she turned her head to the sound of laughter. It sounded like the laughter of a child enthralled in play, but deeper, and somehow not like a child at all. It was Osceola. He was standing in the club-clawed tree, reaching upwards. The waitress set the food down on the black table, and looked upwards. She opened her mouth to yell up to him, but decided against it. She walked back towards the door and stood beside it, watching.

Osceola too was looking upwards. In a swift gesture he used his arms to pull himself up, and raised his leg onto the next branch. Soon he was onto the next branch, swinging himself upwards with a practiced efficiency. The waitress's arms fell to her side in disbelief. She never imagined the pale old man to have such agility. Osceola was on the highest branch, when she decided to yell to him.

“What are you doing?!” She yelled, her hands cupped in front of her mouth. Osceola responded with a chuckling laugh. He did not look her way, but rather groped upwards towards the lowest hanging electrical wire. He grabbed it with both hands and it sagged with his weight as he hoisted himself upwards. Suddenly he was atop the wire, his feet nimbly stacked toe-to-heel and his arms outstretched. He bent his knees and did a little hop, landing deftly on the wire. The waitress's jaw dropped, and when it came back up, she found herself smiling. Osceola set out across the wire, slowly but surely placing each foot intentionally in front of the next. When he was positioned on the wire directly in front of the woman, he looked down at her. He stretched his legs wide and did a very slight bend at his waist, giving her a cautious bow. When he saw her smile and shake her head, he set out again along the wire. The waitress watched his silhouette shrink into glare of the rising sun, until eventually he turned a corner off of Bartholomew street, and was gone.