

DRO

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Miller, Alyson 2016, Treasure, *Softblow*.

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Treasure

A school game, lists clutched in tiny fists, fat and sweaty from the excitement. Find the items and tick them off, running fast to be first, elbows out to clip competitors glimpsed in the periphery—small bones bruise so easily. The sky is low and heavy with heat, the air combustible; a match trigger away from explosion. She doesn't want to play—the screams of her classmates like the war cry of gulls swooping against licorice thick tarmac for the husk of a dry, salty chip. She finds a tree, splays under the foliage; from a distance she looks broken, her marionette limbs split at strange, unearthly angles. The dense canopy entombs her small body, the light filtered through the leaves freckling her skin with delicate lace patterns; she is made alien and new. In the branches, she looks for cat eyes and striped tails but hears only an echo of laughter, tinny and syncopated from across the yard. Her fingers scoop into the dusty ground, combing for gum nut beads and twig shards. As the dirt grows damp, she touches on something sharp, and her excavation grows slow and careful, pulling the earth away from the emerging shape like searching a wound for a splinter. And then there it is, the milk white skeleton of an echidna, trapped as though still nuzzling for termites. She caresses the bones—the maraca shaped skull, needle-thin ribs, the meaty weight of the forearms—and softly blows into the sockets where there used to be eyes. Unnerved by the vacuum stare, she covers the head with her hand, singing a lullaby about the sea as she buries it back down to sleep.