

"*The Orphan of Salt Winds* is a beautifully written, atmospheric novel—reminiscent of *Jane Eyre* with its wild, bleak setting and houseful of mysteries. As a child, the orphan Virginia struggles to understand the strange adult world of her new home at the edge of the salt marshes. As an old woman, she prepares to walk to her death in those very same salt marshes, and the tale that unfolds is bewitching and haunting. Virginia is one of the most deftly captured characters I have encountered."

—**EOWYN IVEY**, author of *The Snow Child* and
To the Bright Edge of the World

"Wonderfully atmospheric, *The Orphan of Salt Winds* is the poignant story of adult intrusion into the private life of a child. Filled with unexpected twists, beautifully rendered characters, and told with great style, it will seep into your soul."

—**KEITH DONOHUE**, author of *The Stolen Child*

"Set in rural England during World War II, *The Orphan of Salt Winds* is a gripping, gothic tale that explores the tragic repercussions of an observant child's imperfect understanding of the adult world she's been thrust into. Elizabeth Brooks's story-telling is vivid and deft, and her characters will continue to haunt and fascinate readers long after they've reached the novel's unexpected—and inevitable—conclusion."

—**JEAN HEGLAND**, author of *Still Time*

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Published by Tin House Books, Portland, Oregon, and Brooklyn, New York

Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brooks, Elizabeth, 1979- author.

Title: The orphan of Salt Winds / by Elizabeth Brooks.

Description: First U.S. edition. | Portland, Oregon : Tin House Books, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018041636 | ISBN 9781947793224 (paperback)

Classification: LCC PR6102.R6628 O77 2018 | DDC 823/.92--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018041636>

First US Edition 2019

Printed in the USA

Interior design by Diane Chonette

www.tinhouse.com

THE
ORPHAN
OF SALT
WINDS

ELIZABETH BROOKS



TIN HOUSE BOOKS / Portland, Oregon & Brooklyn, New York

For Mum and Dad, with love

The winds and tides remember, as do the birds, and the cockles, and the shrimps, and the sand worms, and the whispering reeds, and the grasses, and the lichens, and every single stone in the old seawall. I know they remember, because they passed the story on to me—a stranger—just as I have passed it on to you.

I can't make any promises. I can only ask you to watch and listen and lift your face to the wind from time to time, in case it's carrying the scent of an ancient magic.

One night you will sense something—glitter on black water, perhaps, or the snapping of a sail in an empty sea, or the call of a curlew—and you will know that the time has come.

—“Call of the Curlew,” J. Friedmann

DECEMBER 30, 2015

Virginia Wrathmell knows she will walk into the marsh one New Year's Eve and meet her end there. She's known it for years. Throughout her adolescence and adulthood she spent the last days of every December on edge, waiting for a sign. So when one finally arrives, in her eighty-sixth year, there's no good reason to feel dismayed.

The sign is lying on her front doorstep, and she very nearly treads on it as she emerges around ten o'clock for a blast of night air. She feels its friable curve under the sole of her slipper and hears a tiny crack, but she pulls back before her foot can come down and grind it to unintelligible dust.

Everything aches when she stoops, but she grunts and clings to her stick and succeeds in scooping it up. Whatever it is, it sits in the hollow of her hand, as light as a ball of tissue, and at first the only thing that frightens her is its fragility. She can't see it, with her back to the hall light, but she holds it tenderly in case it's something wounded and alive. It doesn't move, but when she strokes her thumb across its surface there's a purposeful intricacy to its shape, which makes her think it's a creature of some kind.

The wind makes to snatch it away, and Virginia's fingers form a protective curl. She holds it into the light and sees that it's a bird's skull, unfeathered and unfleshed. Virginia knows the marsh birds well—if she had had her own children she couldn't have known them better—and she recognizes the curlew by its long and gently curving bill. The recognition is paralyzing, and the skull almost falls and breaks on the doorstep. Briefly it occurs to Virginia that a shattered sign would no longer be a sign, but this doesn't ring true. She can't unsee what she's seen.

Virginia touches the papery bone, running a gnarled finger around the empty eye sockets. The skull looks like a tiny rapier; a doll's sword. All these years she's been wondering what the sign will turn out to be, and she's come up with the strangest ideas. Words forming on a misted window. An anonymous note. A ghost. She's never imagined anything as perfect as this curlew's skull.

There's a faint warmth at her back from the electric heater in the sitting room, but Virginia shuffles down the steps, away from it, and away from the wedge of light. There is a semicircle of gravel in front of the house, and the stones hurt her soles; it is easier to walk on the grass that grows thick and long against the flint wall. When she reaches the wall, she leans against it, and the edge digs into her waist. She lays her stick along the top and cups the curlew's skull in both hands.

Ribbons of white hair flutter across Virginia's face, and the lapels on her dressing gown flap. The wind is from the north, gritty with the threat of snow and painful to breathe. She faces the marsh and tries to feel excited; to remember the Decembers past when she's prayed, in vain, for this very thing. There is nothing to

see out in the vast blackness, but when she shuts her eyes she imagines she can hear the sucking sands and the boom of distant tides.

It will be cold out there, on Tollbury Marsh. It will be a cold way to go. These bedroom slippers won't last long; they'll be in shreds before she's walked ten yards, and they'll get lost in the reeds, and then she'll be barefoot in the mud. She'll struggle on, ankle-deep, until the mud turns to sand and the sea begins to sound on every side, rushing, creeping in predatory circles. She'll stop and brace herself for the icy slap on her shins and thighs. The tide will rise and race, and by the time it's level with her waist she'll have lost her footing. She wonders if she'll shout their names; she's not sure.

Of course, she's thought about it all before, but the cold has never presented itself so vividly. It's a shame this has to happen on New Year's Eve, instead of a balmy evening in July, but there's no point quibbling.

Virginia runs her hand along the bumpy wall and finds a handful of loose stones, which she pockets. Perhaps she should fetch the flashlight from the kitchen drawer and look for more stones; after all, if the point is to die, then she's better off weighted down. The prospect of returning to the house, even for a minute, is giddying. It's a miniature reprieve. Now that she thinks about it, there are other things she'd like to take. There's Clem and Lorna's wedding photo, though she'll have to remove the frame in order to fit it in her pocket with the stones. There's the book of fairy tales, which will take up all the space in her other pocket. And, of course, there's the manuscript, but that will fold up very small, so long as she can persuade herself to crease it. She'll carry the curlew's skull in one hand; the other she will need for her stick.

Virginia has everything worked out, and yet she doesn't move from the wall. She's hypnotized by the cold and the fingers of wind that comb her hair. It's silly to feel rushed when she's waited so long, but she can't help thinking that if the sign had come earlier in the day she'd have had time to say goodbye to Salt Winds, room by room. She'd have been able to make arrangements for the cat.

A mile away, at the other end of the lane, the lights of Tollbury Point are pricking like pins through the darkness. When she glances over in the direction of the village, picturing the fireworks that will flare and flower for 2016, Virginia remembers the date. Today is the thirtieth of December. Stupid woman—it's not the thirty-first, after all. New Year's Eve isn't till tomorrow.

She's been granted twenty-four hours grace. Virginia doesn't know what to do with herself. She closes her eyes and presses the curlew's skull to her cheek, taking care not to hurt it.