

GWENDOLYN N. NIX

# SHARKS OF THE WASTE LAND

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CATACLYSM  
CYCLE  
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**SHARKS**  
**OF THE**  
**WASTE**  
**LAND**

**Gwendolyn N. Nix**

SHARKS OF THE WASTELAND

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# Dedication

*To the steadfast.*

*To me in my twenties, when you didn't think these dreams would become  
real, but thunder only happens when it's raining, so...*



*Now I see what there is in a name, a word,  
liquid, sane, unruly, musical, self-sufficient,  
I see that the word of my city is that word from of old...*

—Walt Whitman “Manahatta”



Subject T's stomach growled in belly-aching mutiny. Cramps twisted his intestines, pretending there was something to digest. It was different from his usual kind of hunger where he knew he'd get bread in the morning, a protein shake in the afternoon, and a vitamin capsule with his greens at night. It never filled him up, but it kept him running. Now, he barely had enough energy to lift his legs out of the thick mud flats. The cold muck squished between his toes. Bubbly, dark water seeped into his leftover footprints. Vaguely—the fear a shadow of his previous terror—he wondered what kind of outsider diseases he was being exposed to.

He knew he should find clothes, something like what the wardens wore to distinguish themselves from the experiments, but he hadn't seen anyone for miles and miles since his...*escape*. Even thinking that forbidden word made him shiver, and he knew, down to his core, that while he hadn't had a say in leaving the only place he'd ever known, he *had* been a willing participant.

He scanned the coastline and heard nothing but the same familiar and satisfying silence, like that of his cell, broken by the uneasy lapdog roars of the ocean during low tide.

Here, on the outside—and he still couldn't believe he was on the *outside*—it smelled sick with the scent of decaying seaweed and overturned oxygen-deprived sediment. Everything he'd heard from the doctors and psychologists rang true: outside the Facility walls remained nothing but devastation.

White shells peeked out of the mire. He sidestepped glass shards of broken bottle heads the ocean hadn't smoothed yet. Staggering into the breach, he shivered with a sudden cold that was nothing like the stone cell he knew so well. His mouth felt padded with cotton, an indicator that his body had flushed the drugs from his system. A wave knocked him to his knees. He sank down deep, mucking through the filth to pull out his first clamshell. The clam spat murky water in his face, but he smiled—knowing it to be big-toothed and crazy—in spite of it. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he decided he would not die from starvation.

He shuffled to a half-buried corner of a cement block. Chilled mud slicking his shins, he hit the shell against the block until it cracked open like a perfect nut to reveal the meat inside. Gold. The shell's jagged edges sliced his fingertips and bent his nails backward as he pried it open, but he didn't care, not when the chewy mess landed on his tongue.

He suckled at it, choked the mucus down, and sipped at the remaining juice. Shell pieces ground to dust between his teeth. While it tasted like earth, at least it ended the hollowness inside. The clam settled thickly in his stomach, which gurgled for more.

Panting, he desperately foraged farther out in the surf. He ignored the barebones trees growing back on shore, barely noticing the one that stubbornly kept its display of changing orange and red blooms. The cuts on his hands burned as he bashed a second clam open.

"What do you think you're doing?" a voice shouted above him, and his treasure was slapped out of his hand. Landing in the mud with a splat, it was swallowed by a small wave and dragged a handbreadth away.

He bit back a mewl at the loss and licked his lips to savor every smidgen of salty energy. Looking up into the setting sun, he saw a man step in front of him: tall with dark spiky hair, clothed in layers of dirty cotton with a leather satchel and backpack snugly fit to him, his bronzed skin better suited to the hot sun than his own pale—now sunburned—flesh. Subject T wanted to speak, but it had been such a long time and talking was a privilege.

He reached out and recovered his clam—*who knew how many remained?*—but the man immediately snatched it away. Subject T whined. *Please give it back, I'm so hungry.* But the man shook the clam in front of his face like a guard would a fist before punching him. He balked, sitting hard into the mud.

"You can't eat these," the newcomer—*the outsider*—said. "Don't you know that? Look at it." He traced a greenish tinge along the clam's outer lip and pulled the layers back to show a dark brown strip.

Subject T licked his lips. *So succulent, so good.*

"Don't you see? It's bad for you. Makes you sick. It's a piss-clam. The Wallabout really must'a kept you isolated if you don't even know *that*."

Subject T shook his head. No, he didn't know. He did know that after he swallowed, it left a metallic breath on his palate, like blood when he bit his tongue.

"You can't eat any of the mollusks here." The man wiped his hand on his thigh and side-stepped as if to circle Subject T. The stranger never seemed to stop moving, even when the movements weren't necessary. "They're all contaminated."

Subject T shivered as the clothed man reached out to him and lifted the hair off the nape of his neck to touch the tattooed letter there. The man's finger stilled against it, quieting his high-energy intensity for a brief moment.

He couldn't answer this tall male dressed like a real person with boots and a belt buckle shaped into a knot. Subject T knew about books and counting the stones in his cell and about injections. He knew about treatments and punishments and about the letter tattooed on his wrist, anklebones, and even on the inside of his thigh. But he didn't know about piss-clams.

"How did you get out of there?" this newcomer asked.

Subject T trembled more after the foreign touch left his skin. He counted the multitude of bacteria and viruses that could've been passed to him and wanted to laugh because he wasn't technically new to this land. He had been born in a cement tower and raised maybe a hundred miles away from here, yet this was his first time outside.

The clothed man took his elbow and helped him stand. "Too stupid. It'd be a crime not to help you," he muttered as he dug into one of the pockets of his leather jacket and pulled out an old plastic bag. "Us Manahattas are too sweet-hearted for our own good, but it's what made us the strongest tribe out here. Taking in pitiful strays like you." Opening the bag, he shook a cracker into his palm and offered the wafer by holding it to Subject T's closed lips, as though persuading a picky child. The outsider expected him to eat from his hands. Subject T did, no questions asked. Salty. Grainy. He chewed it to paste, let his saliva mold it into a ball, and pushed it to the roof of his mouth.

"Can you talk?" the man asked, shoving a cracker into his own mouth. "Or did the Wallabout take your tongue, too?"

Yes, he thought, watching the man tuck the food away. "Yes," he croaked.

"Mako Saddlerock," the man said, extending his hand. Subject T wasn't sure what to do with it. His education on the dangers of the outside still echoed in his mind.

"Doesn't matter," Mako said. His outstretched hand snuck back into his pocket. Subject T's eyes followed his hand. Mako snorted out a disbelieving laugh. "You don't get to touch the food until you're clean. You're filthy."



"Yes," Subject T echoed. "Filthy."

"I can show you where to clean that sludge-acid off, but that's it. I can't help no Bruykleen man beyond humanity's courtesies."

"Thank you."

Mako grunted, turned away, and tossed his head in a way that said he clearly meant to be followed. "You probably don't even know you're at Dead Horse Bay."

Subject T shook his head. He knew of old crinkled maps full of renamed lands, but he couldn't pinpoint where he was to save his soul.

"Don't even know that you're an abomination." Mako said it like a curse. "That you've probably got people hunting for you right now."

He didn't. But he didn't care. Because the sun was setting, deep with pink and orange swatches, and it was the first one he had ever seen in his life.

When Mako's triumphant cry pierced the silence, Subject T forced himself not to bolt for cover. Mako rushed towards a floating body that rocked with the waves. Yanking on a stiff arm, he pulled the corpse as far on shore as possible. The body lolled back and forth, bloated and blue. A mark on the body's wrist—some kind of badly inked number—made Subject T touch his own clean-edged letter.

Subject T tried to fight the cold, black dread from taking over any rational thought. Shaped by the racing dusk, the dead man reminded him of his hallucination: the skeleton lady who had stood in the distance as he crawled across concrete to the shore. His legs useless and limp, his mind cracked and addled. She waited for him. He shifted awkwardly, refusing to dwell on the parting remembrance of the bone girl urging him to reach her faster.

He watched Mako, instead. Mako, who patted the body down, dipped deft fingers into the pockets, and fingered the soaked wool of the corpse's jacket. Mako, who eyed the boots with a squint, wrestled them off, and tossed them to him, saying, "Your size, perhaps?"

Slightly too big, they scraped against the back of Subject T's heels. He shifted around in them, hating how his feet felt moist and dirty inside these dead man boots. He thought about mold growing under his toenails, but a small ball of relief settled in his stomach. He wasn't going to die. Mako knew how to survive in this wasteland, and if he could stick with this outsider, he might learn how to survive, too.

Mako tutted when he saw the state of the corpse's pants—unsalvageable, Subject T assumed—but the red jacket, heavy with sludge-acid and smelling like rot, peeled off the corpse easily. Mud pellets flew as Mako fanned it out in the deepening twilight. "Have to keep an eye out for these," he said, handing it off. A tight fit, but starvation had made Subject T's shoulders thin enough.

He raised an eyebrow at Mako, trying to copy this outsider's expressions, and shifted in his new boots again. He'd seen bodies before but never in such a state as this. Usually, expired experiments were carried out in white sack bags heavy with the outline of slack limbs.

The head a rounded ball compared to the long narrowness of legs. His coat felt unnaturally heavy. Brown water dripped from the hem.

“Poor bastard,” Mako muttered with a grimace. “Did you know him?” He dipped his forefinger into the mud and swirled it around, then drew three lines from the outside of the corpse’s eyes to the hairline and nudged the body with his foot until the head pointed east.

“What are you doing?” Subject T asked, a little awed by the ritual.

“You might not believe it, but I was raised to give the dead *some* semblance of respect,” Mako said, a grin slowly spreading across his face. “Don’t want his ghost to follow us, do we? Why, did you know him?”

Subject T shook his head. He knew people by their posture and the way they smiled, but he had never seen this particular man before.

“Looks like a guard from the prison. You know, where you came from,” Mako said, tapping his wrist and inclining his head toward Subject T.

Subject T squinted at Mako, feeling his forehead scrunch up in a question. The identification letter tattooed on his wrist blazed with heat.

“The Wallabout,” Mako said, waving his hand out toward the horizon. “The prison ship. Wasn’t that where you were? Wasn’t that where you escaped from?”

Subject T shook his head again. He had never been on a ship before.

Mako let out an exasperated sigh. “You would have had to swim. Not too forgettable.”

Subject T backed away. He couldn’t swim anywhere. No one taught him these things. The water seemed too unforgiving to let him survive for even one minute.

Mako shrugged, pawing the dead man’s pockets again. “Story goes, that old steel hull was overcrowded with society’s most vicious criminals and set out to sea when the world went bad. Prisoners or guards—although honestly the two are probably the same about now—are thrown overboard when they die and wash up here. This isn’t so much of a beach as it is an unofficial cemetery. Sometimes you even luck out.”

He held out a handful of coin-sized purple and white shells to Subject T. When he grinned, the freckles scattered over his nose and cheeks stood out, rendering Subject T amazed at the sudden youthful glimmer cutting through the travel-weary face. He smiled back in response, feeling a thrill at how this outsider changed from man to

boy in whirlwind seconds. "And luck," Mako said gleefully, "is on our side."

Subject T knew next to nothing about outsider tradition, but he liked how this one made Mako glow. Oddly pleased, he watched Mako pack away the shells and tighten the strap of his satchel until it fit snug to his waist. His backpack, some kind of canvas and leather with tarnished buckles, barely budged.

Subject T's gaze drifted back to the sky to see the final colors fade. A dark blanket invaded the gray twilight. Faint twinkles shone through the cloud cover. He wondered if those were stars.

Another jerk of Mako's head indicated he should follow. He did so mindlessly, trying to ignore the cold shakes working their way up his legs. His stomach clenched with a churning gut sickness, and he had to lean over before he was sick. The piss-clam rolled up his throat and splattered on the mud as a pinkish glob.

He felt a pat on the back. "I told you they were bad for you," Mako said. Subject T mourned the loss. He knew he would be hungry again soon, but this was one survival lesson he wouldn't forget.

"C'mon," Mako said. "Got some good water stashed. You can clean out your mouth. Wash your hands."

"Clean," he said.

"Best feeling in the world," Mako said, his hand still on Subject T's shoulder.

Mako's clean water was a metal pail lodged deep into the sand, brimming with water-skimming bugs. "Rainwater's not the best," Mako amended. "Got all the sulfur and junk from the sky, but it's better than nothing. Here, let me."

A small ladle hung off the edge of the pail by a curved handle. Mako picked it up and filled it with water. "Hold out your hands."

Subject T cupped them while Mako poured water sparingly over his scraped knuckles. He rubbed his fingernails. He had read somewhere that bacteria liked to settle there.

Mako scooped more and held it out to him. He pressed the offering to Subject T's chapped lips. The water coated Subject T's tongue in old metal tang and refreshing wetness. It soothed the back of his throat and poured into his stomach, cold and slick. His satisfaction lasted only a moment. "More," he said, handing the ladle back.

Mako filled another cup and sipped it. Subject T wanted the ladle back so bad his fingers itched to snatch it away. He wouldn't, though. He remembered in his early word-hungry days taking another experiment's book with a dirty punch, and the isolation chamber and

drooling pills that came after it. Patience was a good lesson to learn—the Facility’s lesson.

Mako let him drink two more ladlefuls. They shared, passing back and forth, each sipping his share before dipping it into the bucket and spitting out the bugs that got caught in the storm. After, Mako pushed the pail further down into the dirt as if to ground it and said, “C’mon, daylight’s nearly gone.”

As they walked, Subject T couldn’t understand Mako’s purpose for gathering tall yellow grass and dried cardboard slabs. The bundle of sticks under his arm grew in size until they settled under a concrete overpass. Mako cleared a space free of debris and arranged his gathered detritus into a small triangular frame, stuffing spare leaves and grasses between the stick cage.

Subject T wanted to clap when Mako brought out a small lighter. A fire. Mako was building a *fire*. “By the trinity, this better catch,” Mako said, striking his thumb on the trigger. “Only have one flare left.”

The small flame stuttered, caught, and held. Subject T marveled at its fragility as it wavered precariously on an invisible wick. Quickly though, as if starved, the small flame fed on the grass and roared to life. Subject T jumped back. The light overwhelmed him. The heat painted his face, so different from the dust-smelling warmth that coughed out of the Facility’s floorboards. Mako watched him with an intensity that unnerved him, then held out his hands palm-up to the flame. Subject T mimicked, fear knotting his belly as the fire cracked and shot out ember points. He flinched, but somehow Mako’s calmness relaxed him enough to sit. In the heart of the fire, the embers breathed, a respiration of alternating black and orange.

He bent his knees up to his chest, delighting in the heat curling up his shins. The smoke made him dizzy. He wanted to ask questions, confirm truths his psychologist had told him, infinitely curious why Mako didn’t have horrible deformities from environmental toxicity. The words bounced around in his head. He knew how to form inquires, how to mimic and respond, but putting those words into the air was the hardest thing he’d ever done. His jacket hung on a concrete jut, crackling with steam as the wet evaporated and the dirt dried out into flakes.

“Mako is a shark?” he finally asked, breathing a sigh of relief that he was loud enough for Mako to hear.

Mako’s ears perked, and a wide grin spread across his face. He settled near the fire with a sigh, making a diamond with his bent

bowlegs. His ankles touched. He unscrewed a tarnished flask and took a quick draw.

"Yeah," he said at last. "A nasty kind of shark. All teeth. My daddy used to hunt them. Won respect for landing the biggest monster in the whole ocean. My mama wasn't happy when he wanted to name me after his first catch. She figured Bignose Bitch would give me a lot of hell from the other kids."

Subject T nodded, wondering what it would be like to fidget like Mako, full of rough and tumble energy that kept him leaning to check the fire, whistling with his teeth, and picking his nails. Subject T only knew silence and quiet, how to blend into the shadow and remain unseen.

"What's your name?" Mako asked. "Haven't been calling you much of anything, and I figure you'll be hating that right about now."

Subject T shrugged. He really didn't have a name, except for "Subject T" by the people with clothes who spoke through intercoms and observed him through glass and metal grates. He rubbed the lettered cross on his ankle.

"Begin with a T?" Mako guessed.

"T," he said. "T like a thresher." He remembered reading about those short-nosed creatures, wide black eyes and downturned pouty mouths, tails like whips. Endangered one book had said. Extinct, said another.

Mako laughed. "You want to be a shark too?"

He nodded enthusiastically, wondering what the tightening sensation around his mouth meant. "Thresher," he said.

Mako poked the fire. "Two lone sharks in this big world and we find each other on this trash-heap beach? Guess it fits though. It wouldn't be my luck to meet someone from the same tribe, *nope*, of course you've gotta be from one we've been fighting with for years."

A bubble of laughter at Mako's expense built in Thresher's stomach—of course they weren't the *same*: such an observation was obvious baseline data; he was Facility-stock, Mako a dangerous outsider—but he held it inside. He mouthed his new name, building courage to say it out loud again. It almost hurt to hold in the battering words yearning for release. He rubbed a jagged fingernail against his thigh, seeking any kind of relief.

"Where are you headed from here?" Mako asked, hazel eyes narrowed to slits.

"Headed?" Thresher said.

"Where are you going tomorrow?" Mako clarified. "I told you, I can't help you further. My people stopped doing that a long time ago, even before the tribal wars began. I've got things to do, people to see. I won't have you holding me back. You're on your own from here."

"You're leaving me?" Even Thresher noticed the childish terror leaking through at suddenly having to face the next day alone. He didn't know you were supposed to raid dead men's bodies or find pails of rainwater for cleaning or even how to build a fire. Suddenly, the darkness around him became an overwhelming obstacle that would never end. He couldn't stop the sun from setting. He would lose all the colors.

Mako looked surprised. "Not a Wallabout, huh, and don't look like you know if you're a land Bruykleener either. Where exactly *did* you come from?"

Thresher didn't want to talk anymore. He didn't want to remember, not when freedom was more terrifying than the known. All these heavy doubts and regrets made him want to cry. He cradled his head on his knees and closed his eyes, making himself small. He wondered if this was what death felt like, a great unknown full of uncertainty with no schedule at all. He didn't know if freedom was worth it, to still feel this alone.