BRANCHING NARRATIVE SAMPLE: DEAD ASTROLOGY

Dead Astrology is a Twine game I wrote a full draft for over the course of three months. This demo is the opening chapter of that draft, which I ported to Twine in 2022 (the rest of the script has yet to be implemented). I wanted to explore branching narratives but also push by implementing code that allowed for the "hover cursor over text to advance" mechanic to work (which I did with the help of some friends). This involved some light coding knowledge and knowledge of Twine as an engine to fully implement but allowed me to execute on a unique concept not available in Twine's base feature set. An excerpt is available here for the sake of convenience, but this is best experienced as a Twine game, which you can download it at: https://surielvazquez.itch.io/dead-astrology-sample.

Dead Astrology (Text-Only Sample)

By Suriel Vazquez

Color Key/Reading Guide:

[Click text to advance]
[[Branching choices, lead to next section]]
{Hover cursor over text to advance}

Intro

The floorboards belch a raspy whine as you step onto the porch of the old house. The house seems upset [you've arrived.]

It's the house's fault, really. It was the first thing you'd looked at on purpose since you started walking down that gangly dirt road earlier. The upset house had stood out amidst the otherwise eternal stretch of clay sands, copper stones, and [blood-red sky.]

Even better, the verdant lichen on its roof and dense splotches of color at its base suggested someone had decorated. [Someone else was stuck here, too.]

The path from the road to the impinged-upon house had worn millions of skeletal foot and pawprints. Scattered across it were halves of antlers, misplaced teeth, and abandoned shells. Among all these remnants you found a single, glistening fish scale. Even without a working knowledge of this ethereal, arid plane, it seemed incongruous. It became [your keepsake.]

Now, here on the porch, the splotches have morphed into seashells, bones, teeth, and withered flowers embellishing a raggedy screen door. They all beg for a second look.

[[Shells break up the open spaces on the surface of the door.|**1A**]]
[[Hard animal remains adorn the door.|**1B**]]

[[Withered plants overrun most of the porch.|**1C**]]

1A

Crown conchs, shark eyes, sundials, saw-tooth {pens}

{You wince as you remember things you've left behind back home}

and other skin-colored shells pockmark the spaces between animal fragments and shriveled foliage. The shells' openings face outward. Are they goading onlookers who want to listen to the ocean to [pluck them?]

No dice; they're surprisingly stubborn when pulled and offer no respite from the desert howls. Even if they could be dislodged, [what ocean would they echo?]

[[You wonder if you'll ever see water again.|**2**]]

1B

Somehow, skulls, fangs, and horns from {the other side}

{a sharp cold pierces your spinal cord}

have wound up littered everywhere around the irked house. No one stays here for long — the road calls everyone back eventually — so they move on without paying attention to these fragments. Making them the centerpiece of this door, loud and impossible to ignore, is a fitting [[tribute to the dead.|**2**]]

1C

Their ends curl up slightly, struggling to regain their former selves. The mounds of foliage on either side of the door hint at their previous shape: Serbian ramondas, doradillas. Curled bushes like shriveled hands grasping at air. Known as {resurrection plants}

{You shiver at the mere thought of death now}

they sleep in this state between states most of their lives, but loosen their grip when exposed to the life-affirming power of water. Some of them must have slept too deeply and [[drifted over here.|**2**]]

2

Noises rustle from the bothered house's second story; it's now forced to acknowledge you. Your heart begins to sputter. Does the house know about the

panic attack you had on the way here? About your heart sputtering? How does your "heart" work now, [anyway?]

[The door rattles for a beat then swings inward.]

The frame squeaks as it reveals its decorator. A copper-coated skeleton you assume spends at least some of their time scooping up seashells, hunting for skulls, flattening curled plants, and maintaining the beleaguered house. They look a lot like you, except bronzed and furnished with more trinkets.

[[They're clearly fascinated by animals. They're wearing their remains.|**2A**]]

[[A coat of thin lichen is slung over their svelte shoulder-bones like a poncho.|**2B**]]

[[Their bony fingers are lined with more seashells.|**2C**]]

2A

Fangs and what appear to be nubs of finger bones line the brooches and necklaces the skeleton wears on their hands and neck. Enough to imbue the figure with lifetimes of good luck, some {would say.}

{What is everyone saying about you back home now, you wonder. Are they kind?}

The shiny, animate bones lunge forward in a [bemused greeting.]

[["\"Hello.\""|3]]

2B

Covering the skeleton's clavicles are two bronze flats engraved with a mysterious symbol. Flashes from their toe rings force you to {squint}

{You realize you can't squint anymore, but the reflex lingers}

and invite downwards glances at their bare feet. Hanging on the bridge of their cheekbones, where their cheeks would be if they had flesh, are two brilliant orbs of diamond. They notice you flinching, retreat slightly, [and speak.]

[["\"Hello.\""|3]]

2C

Tiny, sharp turritellas protrude from the skeleton's joints, covering the gaps skin no longer blankets. Stripped of their purpose as shelter and defense against predators, their pointed shape makes their current owner look [lavish rather than dangerous.]

The skeleton feels your stare. They curl their hand and tuck it [out of sight.]

It didn't take long for them to notice someone skulking around the porch. But they hoped whoever it was would have gotten bored and walked back toward the road by now.

[["Hello," they say courteously.|**3**]]

3

They don't so much speak as expel a sentiment, an intrusive thought that resonates throughout your frame. Their chrome jaw does not swing as their thought diffuses onto the porch. Their eyeless sockets can see {somehow}

{so can yours}

and their abyssal darkness acknowledges you. They twitch their head right, motioning to the frustrated house's living room. Various fangs, shells, and diamonds rattle against their [red-brown frame.]

The living room betrays little about its ossified inhabitant. Its low ceiling and square, cozy frame are offset by how sparse it is. The room houses only a single table made from peeling black wood standing triumphant atop the flattened skin of a big cat you don't recognize. The two accompanying chairs are made of different kinds of wood, both sporting multiple faded colors from years of [patchwork repairs.]

Halfway to their seat on the far side of the table, the sullen copper skeleton suddenly stops and pivots their skull back in [your direction.]

"Right," another thought echoes inside you. You recognize it as external, but uncomfortably intimate. "You have questions, yes? I get a lot of those."

[["Who are you?"|**4**]]

[["What is this?"|**4**]]

[["Where am I?"|**4**]]

4

Expelling thoughts into the world comes naturally, an unconscious twinge that produces a tangible emotion-message while keeping your morass of undeveloped thoughts contained inside your panicked cartilage. The skeleton responds to your thought [with their own.]

"I do readings here. Tarot, astrology. They call me Copperhead, because... well." Copperhead's hands wave down their moss-laden, copper-colored

ligaments. "Most people who come here are curious about what's happened to them. More curious than they are about going down the road, at least. So I answer their questions and tell them what they are and what they [might yet be."]

[["\"'What's happened to them?' Wait, what's happened to me?\""|**4-2**]]

4-2

{You already know.}

Asking only makes the knot that's been tugging at your invisible stomach {worse}

The skeleton holds their pose for a moment. Without the twitching of eyes, the palpitation of heart, the gorging of lungs that evince life, their freezing makes everything {stop}

{You're dead.}

[["You're dead.”|**5**]]

5

You hear the tired house churn. You wonder if houses in the afterlife have piping. Neither the house nor its imagined pipes fall apart in the {short silence that follows,}

{You don't have a heart but feel it pulse}

{You can't hyperventilate and it only makes the impulse to do it worse}

{Why is the brain you no longer have doing this to you?}

{It's okay}

{You're dead but you're okay}

{Right?}

{Calm down}

[Calm down.]

To be continued...