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**Arlitz**  
**&**  
**Righting The Self**

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K L HENDERSON

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I am indebted, as always, to my family and friends who sustain me in life and writing.

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**Abstract**

This submission is in two parts. The first, the draft of my novel, *Arlitz*, is set in a care facility in rural New Zealand, and in Russia. *Arlitz* is a psychological ‘tandem character’ novel written essentially in the form of epistolary memoir. It deals with themes of memory, entrapment, isolation, impotence, love, intemporality and the transformative power of story. The underlying unitary thread is the protagonist’s journey from submissiveness to strength and the act of love and bravery that gives his life meaning.

The second, *Righting The Self*, is an exegesis, which frames my creative work in its literary, psychological and stylistic context. It suggests that writing a work of fiction is a form of Narrative Therapy by which an author rewrites facets of trauma or illness in their life, employing significant themes and symbols in order to find meaning and healing.

**THESIS:**

**ARLITZ**

**PART ONE**

**FURRY MOYRA**



Good morning, handsome boy. It's the first of January. Happy New Year. Heading for twenty eight degrees, they say. In my country, it will be snowing. Minus twenty eight degrees.

*I'll get his other arm. I don't know how you lived in that climate.*

Fur coats. Hats. It's not so bad. We're going to sit you up.

*Is his colour okay do you think? Output?*

It all looks good. Ready, lift. There you go. Well done. Pillows okay? All set for the day. Are you ready for breakfast? Let's try. It's porridge. Just warm. I'm going to put the spoon in your mouth now. Holy Mother.

*What is it?*

He opened his mouth.

*Voluntarily?*

Yes.

*Excellent. Make a note.*

Clever boy. Can you hear those crickets going crazy already?

*Cicadas.*

Oh yes, those are cicadas.

*Tell me about the snow.*

Would you like to hear it, too, sweet boy? A story about snow? Try another spoonful.

## Morning

The beige lampshade is the first thing I see. Then the syrup-coloured walls. Then the sash window hung with plummets of calico that the breeze inflates like unfastened hammocks. Through the glass, in the distance, bush on the echoing hill, the sun a vague flare behind the trees. Bluing sky you could sip through a straw. I write gracefully, I think, the solace of the environment.

Lawn slopes from the front of the house to a vegetable garden, a chicken coop on stilts and a barn. I know this because I've scuffed down to them in not-so-standard issue Crocs, (mine are brightish yellow) petted the hens and asked for hemp seeds to plant. Request denied. A fence at the end of the property and then four willows weeping into a marshy creek that runs beside the lane. The lane leads to a road that leads to a highway. That last bit, I surmise. Who knows where this piece of country is.

I feel I've been asleep for a week. Light, as if I've had my mouth open all night and gorged on air. On snowflakes. The points of my bones no longer ache. None of that fleeting yet terrifying paralysis. I realise this is the first night I haven't dreamed about a bridge. Instead, Harvey's voice - it sounds like Harvey's - and a woman's. Foreign. Can breathing be poetry? Each breath matched to the cadence of her voice.

## Damage

I am not a prisoner. The reason I'm here is a six. It's a question of scale but which end is up? Should I be aiming for seven or five? I'm expected to get to the number that is well enough to leave but I wonder if there really is an accurate measure for my sort of problem. Which is Inertia. I don't see the point in anything. I guess six means 'can't be fucked'.

I like sleeping. In fact, my greatest fear is to be awake continuously, to never slip back into sleep. Imagine never being free from yourself.

I remember the last time I was awake but not here. Before my lassitude had been analysed. In a high room filled with the leftover shriek of sex. Few details spring to mind after the wallpaper. A piece torn in the shape of a horn. I remember you saying *I want the whole you* and then the faint departing tread of your shoes on the stairs. Goodbye. And, accustomed to saying nothing, I put on my clothes and took a felt pen from the dresser and wrote. I wrote on the wallpaper and the walls of the loft, the architraves and doorframe. I wrote over fleur de lis and joins and switch plates and dust and around that glossy stain along one skirting board and when I ran out of walls, I wrote on the windows until the new light at the edge of the sky reminded me of the interminable days to come. I try not to remember that I wrote of how relentless my sadness would be because I could not please my lover.

I wrote of things that had happened to me and things that never would. I didn't write that my lover was the one who had suggested lopping off the parts of me which had rendered me unwhole. I put my forehead against my words and looked out through the glass to the street, to the hospital where I'd pushed beds between floors, standing half-lit and unpromising in the dawn, and I thought of the strong people asleep and awake there I had met but never known. I turned my eyes to the road and the bridge that spanned the motorway. Then I leaned back into the room and thought, well, buddy, you've written a work of such exquisite perfection that even a born perfectionist wouldn't alter it. And knowing I could never surpass it and understanding in my heart that my work was done, I put away the pen, tore off a strip of wallpaper and put it in my pocket and set out to live in the abiding memory of the city as a dead man.

And yet, here I am. Alive and well. Well, alive. Only dying now as much as anybody else. But I'm doing it with stoicism. With the same impassiveness of the terminally ill.

I wonder what happened to that piece of wallpaper. It was a song playing along a saxophone. I flip back the duvet and look down at my chest, the green pyjamas. Untie the drawstring and lift the waistband with my thumb. Everything I remember exactly the same.

Inside the wardrobe door there's a mirror. I put my fingers in the dints of my mended ribs and stand there like an accordion player. Saxophone, accordion. Those are instruments I could learn. I have plenty of time. My chest and arms reflected and hairless. Likewise my head. A drum. Ba dum.

Again I examine the damage. I note here that, after the first step, jumping from a bridge is exactly the same as falling from a bridge. You'd think a man would be more of a mess after falling forty metres. Just the ear-to-ear scar where they cut my skull to relieve pressure and an uneventful line where they removed my spleen. Then the wonky ribs, some fused vertebrae and a small kink in my left wrist. I slide up my pyjama legs like the Big Reveal and take a look at the knobby tissue that seals the holes made by shin bones compounded into fractures. I suspect one of my hips is metal. After the repercussions of concrete have travelled through heels, legs, hips and spine, a mariachi band plays in the skull. Not that I recall my jaw turning into castanets. Most of my teeth, I believe, are porcelain.

I daydream about bridges. Gullies. I swivel a little to display the mirrored words on my side. There they are: Be Just. It would be fair to say I've been just. Always impartial. Even-handed. The words of my tattoo are taken from a story. In it, the needles of a machine brutally inscribe a condemned man's sentence on his back. The story, I think, is about making a better future. At the time, I thought I'd found with my lover a new and perfect way of living, and possibly because I was a little scared of my lover, yes, and wanted a clear reminder visible to him, I had the writer's words etched in red under my ribs. Ten pairs of which were snapped in the landing but now knitted together in a way that the Be rides a little higher than the Just. I always think accidental scars are ugly whereas intentional ones are beautiful.

Be just what? the tattooist asked. I knew he was also a urologist. I'd seen him in scrubs when I'd collected patients from theatre. Not a well-read urologist, but the script is surgically precise. Of course, I've only ever been able to read the tattoo upside down or reversed. In the same way nobody has truly seen his own face.

## **Inmates**

I put on a robe and walk through the lounge and into the kitchen. The rooms are enormous because this was once an outdoor education camp. The dormitories divided into bedrooms. There are two bathrooms and a Rainy Day Recreation Room and a Meditation Room and a Library, all the doors labelled with illustrated signs. Harvey's office and an equipment storage room and laundry take up the rear wing. I've never been in the laundry. Clothes exist, clean and pressed, in my wardrobe.

The other two sit at the dining table. Miriam, the doctor, (obstetrician and gynaecologist) retired, and Ilya, the Siberian, also retired. On first meeting them, you'd swear they've lived on the same street as you, or are childhood friends of your mother. They have those sort of faces. Every morning a moment of recognition in each other's eyes so we know we are not really strangers. Of course, Ilya has a face that looks like it was recently clear-felled with a propeller. His own mother would have a hard job picking him out of a line-up.

On the grading scale where ten is worst, I would guess an eight and a four. I read that a group of prisoners is called a pity and that is pretty much what we are. Although, if I was a real prisoner, I'd have exercise yard muscles and a pet sparrow by now.

Good morning fellow inmates, I say, because it always is, the sun unfailing. The grass incurably green so it must rain at night, although I've never heard rain. Between good night and good morning I hear nothing but a background hum and the voices in my dream. People should be jumping the fence to get in, frankly, so picture-perfect it is here.

What's the time, Arlitz? This is Miriam. She asks this question at least twenty four times a day. I make something up. It would be nice to have time but I have little

sense of it. A paucity of clocks. Eight thirty seems to keep her happy. She pulls down the brown tea-cosy hat she always wears. It makes her look more eccentric than she is. I couldn't tell you the colour of her hair because I've never seen it. Perhaps she's as bald as I am. I imagine Miriam's parents at her birth. The trouble of their daughter's lip gaping un-joined between her nose and gums. The moment of wishing she'd been a boy and might have grown a moustache to hide the skew-whiff stitching. I sit and eat breakfast and try not to look at Ilya's mouth, also reconstructed, making a meal of the porridge. My seamed colleagues. Nobody says much because everyone's got their own thoughts and agendas. It's just passing organic milk and raw sugar and whole wheat toast in the silver toast rack and butter and natural fruit preserves and active manuka honey and please and thank you because inmates are polite. Miriam can be chatty but nobody chats before Harvey arrives. As soon as Harvey walks in the door, people want to be more than themselves. He calls us his *patients*. Miriam says patients is Latin for suffering but I don't think so.

Harvey Dinky. He brightens us, our link with the outside world. He is wise and available and I have to admit, if I had hopes, I'd hang them on him. Harvey's outside world is only a minute away, in the house above this one, at the end of the lime rock driveway that winds along our boundary fence to the top of the hill. He lives in the villa that was built by shepherds when the land was farmed. (You could call Harvey a shepherd in the metaphorical sense. The way he looks after us and guides us and sticks his crook over the edge and hoists us back out of various clefts and abysses.) There are still sheep tracks in the hillside but the bush has scrambled over the ruts and wrapped like a stole around our house and his.

How our house gets its name is Ilya. Harvey appears through the doorway holding someone's hand. When I see the new inmate attached, my heart thunks. Women don't do that to me as a rule. It's only because she's aesthetically pleasing, I think. I do appreciate beauty. But there's more than that, a stirring of an old story, a rushing in the hollows of my body like a memory trying to make itself felt. My memory has been shit since falling. I mean landing. The woman's face is boyish and stunning, even with the line of sutures across her forehead. Ilya will be thrilled to have a comrade-in-stitches.

Come sit by me, Miriam says.

Everyone, this is Hunapo, says Harvey. Hunapo, welcome to Te Whare Moera, the House that Sleeps in the Sun.

He tries to pronounce it the way a weather presenter will say *Torpor*, not *Taupo*. Whare Moera. But he mangles it.

Furry Moyra? Ilya says. Who? Is this girl Furry Moyra?

Tears are a luxury. Laughter is. But I laugh so hard I almost have to be sedated.

You didn't tell us this place has a name. Lovely, says Miriam. Furry Moyra.

Don't mind Arlitz, says Harvey. We try not to. Toast and honey?

I get up from rolling on the floor and watch Hunapo eat. The honey shining on her perfect lips. Ra the sun and po the night. Furry Moyra. Names slip so easily into legend. It's okay being in her, our hairy woman. I suppose Furry Moyra and these people are my consolations for being alive.

Miriam says that Harvey lives with his disabled wife but I've looked up at the shepherds' house and seen the dark-haired woman on the verandah and she seems quite able. I've watched the little red inspirations of her cigarettes. She smokes at dusk, looking toward the hills and never toward me, even though I've waved like a maniac.

## Reason

Most people think they're made of atoms and molecules but Harvey says we're made of stories. Everything we are, patients, is a story. When Harvey asked me if I would like to write a letter, I said I wouldn't like. But I start one because I like Harvey. He has this idea about writing as therapy. You know. Write a letter to your persecutor or your lover or your mother and tell them how they fucked up your life.

Is there a reason to drag up the past? I ask. It's over.

Reformatting, Harvey says. Every time you tell a story, your past is altered. Writing will help you address and move forward.

I didn't say, I've already told my story to a wall.

Going forward is the catch-cry at Furry Moyra. If Harvey thinks we can alter our past, I'll humour him.

This is the letter, of course. It goes without saying it will never be posted. Already I'm wondering how much I've forgotten and how many lies I'll write. Which is really the same thing.

You'd think we'd see staff, outmates other than Harvey, but Harvey says we are in collaboration with our healing - we are in charge. The thing that bugs me is who cooks the porridge? Who puts clean towels in the bathroom? Everything we need is already here. If Ilya wants to concoct his weird meat pancakes, there's mince in the fridge. If I feel like strumming a guitar there'll be one propped up behind the sofa. Yes, I know I can't play the guitar but what if.

Every day there's a time menu written up on the kitchen whiteboard. Meal-time, Garden-time, Craft-time, Writing-time, Talk-time, Relax-time. We have Talk-time in Group and Talk-time alone with Harvey. My session with Harvey goes something like this:

So, Arlitz. Have you thought any more about the problem?

You mean my Inertia or my Suicidal Intention.

You say MY inertia. Do you see yourself as a lazy person?



Not lazy. I've always been quite chore-driven. More, um, disinterested.

You feel like you've lost your spark?

I'm not sure I ever had one.

Can you recall a time when you did have a spark?

Yes, the moment before I decided to kill myself.

Where did that spark come from?

Anger. Disappointment. Fear.

You've said before that you don't feel much but it sounds to me, Arlitz, like you can feel a lot.

I'm just pulling words out of my arse.

I'm interested to know if you think that spark was because you were actually making a decision of your own.

You tell me.

Talk to me about the first time you remember a spark.

Then I tell Harvey a story like he wants, so he thinks I'm making a case for my existence, so he can keep saying, can you tell me more about that and how does that have control over you and one thing I'm curious about. And by the end of our session, curiously, I do feel as if I care a little more, as if I need to doubt my apathy.

## Spark

She probably called me Masha from the beginning. As long as my father wasn't within earshot. I was six. I came in from school one afternoon and my mother wouldn't let me near the tap to get a drink. I was a boy who needed a lot of hydration what with all the running I had to do from the hair bullies. My father had tried to cut my hair but my mother always burst into tears and said, God gave me this one consolation for my loss, Ewan. We're not cutting it. My mother recapped the Bible story in which Delilah sheared Samson of God's gift and the bald guy spent the rest of his days yoked to a well. I wouldn't have minded the well. Walking in a prescribed circle for most of the day had its appeal. Even at six I had no oomph. When my grandfather asked what do you want to be when you grow up? I replied, You have to *be* something?

My mother said, go to your room and put these on, darling. She handed me a purple dress and purple underpants. Lilac. I can remember being really thirsty and not knowing which way the dress did up. My mother brushed my long curls into bunches and then she got us a tray with milk and biscuits. The rubber bands dragged the hair on the back of my neck every time I gulped. I didn't mind it. My mother turned on the radio and we danced. That's lovely, Masha, she said. From then on, five afternoons a week, and sometimes all day on a Saturday when my father was working overtime at the Oak Sea Cemetery and Crematorium, I answered to Masha. It never crossed my mind I could argue against putting on the dress. It seemed like a regulation. In the evenings, when my father's car turned into the driveway, my mother would rush me into the bathroom and strip me off. Tuck those jiffies away, she'd say and I had to stand smooth with my boyhood clamped between my legs while she turned on the shower. Lip gloss. I can taste the lip gloss she put on me. Cherry.

Harvey writes about a million notes. If you're curious about what I'm writing, I'll show you, he says. My notes aren't secret.

I catch a glimpse of the word *fortifying*. Does Harvey ask: Do you think all that negative stimuli evoked intense feelings of emasculation, Arlitz? No he doesn't. All he says is: Is there a reason you didn't call them Mum and Dad?

Do you want to hear the spark, or not? I say.

When I was eight, my father patted my head after saying grace and a hairclip came away in his hand.

Renée, this has got to stop.

My mother across the table blushed and said, What? What Ewan?

I'm not having a repeat of the deception. First the water and now the dressing up. I'm putting my foot down now. We really need to pray about this.

I looked straight at my mother and said, I'd like a number one, Dad. Can you do it now? That was the sparking moment. A crunch as my mother bit right through a chop bone.

She watched us from the kitchen window. I sat on a barstool in the backyard with a towel round my neck, my father asking Jesus to bless me and my hair falling in pretty scraps from the clippers to the lawn. My mother opened the sash and yelled, You *are* telling him we're not his real mummy and daddy, right? My father said, Are you mad? Yes I am, my mother screamed. My curls coiled on the grass like question marks. From then on, the mother who had idolised me ignored me.

This story goes a long way to explain why years later I answered your ad.

## Names

Am I lying about my name? I don't remember. Some would gladly discard their names to stop anyone finding them. You and I knew how to do that. A name is a hook, an anchor that holds you. I'm having trouble remembering names and faces. I was going to write anaemia. I had to think for a full minute before I came up with amnesia. I'm not sure I'd know you if you walked into the room.

You need a strong name for when two people are going to talk about you, says Miriam.

Harvey says we should choose new names to signify our rebirth. He puts rebirth in quotation marks with his fingers.

Renée says Miriam. That's my daughter's name. It means rebirth.

My mother's name was Renée, I say.

Well, you can't call yourself that.

Before she becomes Miriam, she looks out of the Rainy Day Recreation Room to the willows in the creek and thinks of Miriam in the Bible who wove a basket for her brother Moses, and who became a prophetess. She checks later and finds her new name means Sea of Bitterness or Sorrow. Oh dear, she says.

Hunapo means hidden darkness.

Hunu means sun ray, Harvey says. How about Hunu instead?

But Hunapo shakes her head. Harvey was probably hoping for more hopeful names.

Ilya says, I know a shaman who saved a woman close to death by changing her name. She got out of her deathbed and went to milk her cows. Already I changed my surname when I came to this country. To Svoboda. Meaning Freedom. I will stay Ilya. A man can't disappear altogether.

Ilya, at least, means God is He.

We have named all the hens Miss Lay: Larissa, Lavinia, Letitia, Lilian and Lulubell. I dally with L names for myself. Lassitude, Languor, Lethargy, and Lack. But these are names I might never recover from. I choose instead a name as nothing as the space of a grave. A name that doesn't exist in any name book. Arlitz. A name out of my

dreams. For a man trying to dispense with the past, I hope it will be a hard name to seek out.

## Voices

*Say his name.*

Arlitz, sometimes you freak me out. A creepy serenity, that's what someone said about the comatose. I agree. You have your impulses but what are you? Lying there God-knows-where between sleep and wake. Your eyes wide like space, the pupils dormant moons. Serene, I hope.

*Always use the same soap.*

I use Dove so you'll know my smell whenever I walk into the room. Can you smell me? Vetiver and lily.

*Touch the top of his wrist. Ask, where are you? Try to be at peace with yourself. If you're not, he won't come to the surface.*

Where are you? How can I reach you? Where is your self? There are hunters in the trees on that far ridge. Tomorrow I'll put you in your chair and wheel you to the window and you can look out. I heard them calling through their horns, their cupped hands. And the stags answering. Barking their territory. We've heard them, haven't we? Harvey's wife says she was a hunter.

*Massage his hands and arms. Move his legs. Straighten his knees.*

Perhaps you want to be left alone.

*Talk to him. If he responds, follow that train.*

What do I say?

*Anything.*

I'll tell you everything. Just quietly, the whisper of a flake falling and settling. Nina had a mother who didn't love her enough. I feel it, your fingers in my palm stiffening. You hoot. Perhaps you're following another train altogether.

Would you like to hear Nina's story? I want to tell you everything I remember. But first you must do something for me. A word. That's all I want. One word from those fine lips. A trick of the tongue and then I will begin. Who knows what you'll hear or where your dreaming will follow it. Sometimes I'll hold your hand and whisper close to your ear. When you're disturbed I'll stand on the verandah and look down the hill to the

weeping willows. The white driveway curving to the lane. Once I saw Harvey come out of the bush, holding a cigarette. I didn't know he smoked.

Nightshift. The night shifts. We're in this shifty night together, Arlitz. But where the hell are we?

*Headache?*

A little bit. You, Harvey?

*On and off. Good night.*

Your grandfather is a good man. There he goes with your grandmother, along the hallway to the bathroom. He'll help her get ready for bed. I'll sit here with the taste of iron on my tongue, chiming in my teeth. Can you taste it?

There are trees all around us. Natives. Wet, luminous leaves. Grasses. Blades like bent swords. The bush a dark fur around the shoulders of this high house. You're jangly tonight. Where do you imagine you're running to? I'm putting my hands on your knees. Shh. Still now. Perhaps, across the valley on the hill that echoes this one, a hunter is watching us. Look, hunter! A foreign woman framed in the dull-lit window. Some remnant of beauty in her middling face. The hunter could raise his gun and line me up in his sight and do whatever he wanted. Say something, Arlitz. Say one word and I'll tell you Nina's story.

## Seeds

And that's how it goes in the night. As much as I can remember and manage to get down during Writing-time. What kind of a dream is this do you think? A woman talking to me as if I'm retarded. Harvey's voice. Hunters. What the hell? And the thing is, I do taste metal. The iron flavour of blood down the back of my throat. You can see how this kind of night can set you up for a weird day. And yet, somehow this dreamwoman consoles me. I want to hear her story.

Put yourself in touch with the earth, says Harvey.

Can't we just write it a letter? I say.

But we are encouraged to nurture something. You once told me I had the vigour of a dandelion. So that's what I've planted. Dandelions. What few people realise is that the dandelion has a certain structural strength. It can withstand a decent amount of trampling. And a dandelion can regenerate from seed. Which I certainly can't. So that last part is a bad analogy. But, otherwise, even though you thought you were being funny or unkind, you were right. The dandelion has unseen vigour.

Hunapo sprinkles two packets of wildflower seeds into the topsoil around Ilya's potatoes and carrots. I hold up the empty packet. Miriam watches Hunapo tamping the seeds down with her blue Croc and she says, Oh god, calendula. She sits in the dirt and cries. Miriam lost her husband in a wildflower meadow. Not lost as in died. Lost as in disappeared.

The flowers aren't bad, Harvey says. You've made them a symbol. Can you change the way you think about them? Tell me about the meadow, Miriam.

I know it's not the flowers, Miriam says. It's the bees. I was the one who found the bees and they were the trouble.

I always think any story is made worse with bees, I say. Sure, there's the honey but other than that. Bees hover, they swarm, they sting. That sinister humming. Does that humming drive you mad?

What humming?



Don't tell me you haven't heard it? Guys? The humming that sounds like bad wiring. Like mice singing acapela in the wainscots. I don't even know what a wainscot is but that's what it sounds like.

My fellow inmates shake their heads. Bang goes my collective tinnitus theory. Anyway, it gets on my nerves.

How is this relevant to Miriam's story, Arlitz?

I'm just agreeing bees are trouble.

Miriam, what do you think the bees represent? Harvey says.

But Miriam stands up and runs down to the barn.

I'll go, I say.

That might not help, Harvey says.

I watch Miriam crawl under the blue sheet that covers the station wagon. I lift up a corner and see her in the back putting on her seatbelt. It's not a bad way to handle a problem, I think. Hide under a tarpaulin and buckle up. I get in the front seat.

Is that you, Dinks? Miriam says.

It's Arlitz. We're safe in our blue cocoon. I switch on the overhead light and look through the windscreen at the blank road ahead. I say, Tell me about the bees, Miriam.

## Miriam

It was the hospital summer picnic. And Dinks' birthday. Grete made a cake. I was always hopeless. We left the crowd to their French cricket and Frisbee and went across the picnic area to the bush. Dinks mowing his net at the gnats around our legs. His jars clinking in his haversack. Grete calling after us, don't get lost! And Bern: No nooky in the bush, now! Ha ha! Bern and Dinks had gone through med school together, eight years ahead of me. Both psychiatrists.

Dinks found a track and we followed it. I had to keep urging him forward, towards the sun we could see on the other side of the bush because he was forever stopping to lift logs and scrabble through leaf litter. Honestly, he could spend half an hour watching a tribe of larvae crawling around his palm. When we came out into daylight, we laughed. It was so unexpected. A sea of grasses. A straw-coloured meadow all spattered with wildflowers. A wall of ti-tree surrounding it.

I waded in, of course, holding my skirt in a high curtsy like I was going to dance. Calendula and cornflowers, foxgloves, poppies, sleeping beauty. White and purple and red and yellow. Swallows startling and darting off. All the sun's heat seemed to be focusing there. I lay back in the grass, in the freesias and primroses, and I waited for Dinks to lie down too, but he ploughed outwards. I watched him conducting his net in the bluest sky, catching dragonflies and little mauve butterflies, examining them carefully before setting them free. I thought - I often have - perhaps if I had four extra legs and was covered in mesh, he would pay me more attention. If only I'd been a damsel fly with a glamorous Latin name.

So I bathed there in the sunlight, picking seeds out of my hair, listening to the rustle of my husband among the dry stalks. I closed my eyes and heard the other sound. It must have been there all along.

Dinks tapped my foot with his net, all excited, and said, This place has its own ecosystem.

Listen. I sat up and held his shirt so he wouldn't run off. Can you hear that buzzing? He pulled me to my feet. We stood inside my flattened grass-shape and listened. A murmuring, like far-away traffic.

We went across the meadow to the ti-tree and pulled back branches and climbed through. There we were, on top of a shallow cliff. The land crumbled down and flattened out into a ledge. A pond below the ledge and then nothing but a bare valley. All grey clay. No trees. And the noise under our feet. A terrible stink of rotting algae was coming from the pond. Awful, but I followed my husband down. I wish we'd stayed at the top. Never gone close. It was my fault. We had to hold our arms over our noses. Can you hear it, Arlitz? The ground throbbing with the hum of a million creatures.

What was it?

An underground hive. A massive one. Dinks pulled a lump of clay off the bank and handed it to me. I split it open like a sponge. Inside, a maze of cells left empty by grown bees. Feel this, I said. The lump was warm. Hot. Heat coming out of the honeycombs. I said we'd better not disturb them. We should get back. It's almost two. I wanted to pick some flowers for Grete.

But Dinks was lying on his stomach, cantilevered over the pond. A handkerchief over his nose. His head under the ledge. Then this squadron of bees, perhaps three hundred, all in formation, flew over his shoulder and before I could call out, they swung in the direction of the meadow.

This is the main entrance, he said and he grabbed his net and swept it across the hive opening and the handkerchief fell into the pond.

Well. I watched it lying on the weeds and shrivelling, not like something dissolving, but like the fabric was decomposing, its fibres rotting in front of our eyes. Black, then gone, in a few seconds. Dinks sat up, coughing from the fumes coming off the slime, and I helped transfer the bees he'd netted to a jar.

I feel a bit odd, he said.

I did, too. My hands were so shaky I could hardly trap the angry bees under the jar lid. I felt really anxious. Light-headed, slightly sick. You know when you can taste your fillings? I don't think this is safe, I said. I've never seen bees like this.

Five rings on the abdomen. Very unusual, Dinks said. I don't think it's the weed. I feel, I don't know, electric.

Electric was right. He broke off more bulbs of nest and put them in his haversack. Then he sat down next to me on the clay. There were no plants growing there, other than that treacherous-looking algae.

It's like a combination of seasickness and daydreaming, I said. I had vertigo. A metal taste.

Some sort of magnetic field, Dinks said.

My heart was beating very slow. I put my fingers on my neck. I didn't like it. He took my hand and we struggled to our knees but we sunk back. It was such a big effort to move. Our bodies had got so heavy. Like there was a different gravity above the hive. My head was pulsing.

Dinks asked me, are you seeing flashing lights? And that was the last thing I remembered hearing until we woke up again.

Miriam swivels her beanie over her scalp. Do you think it was the weed, Arlitz?

We look at each other in the rear vision mirror. Weed can do weird things. What happened then?

I checked my watch. It was five o'clock. We'd slept for three hours but it only seemed like a few minutes. We managed to drag ourselves over the clay and up the cliff. As we got near the top, I felt my heart speeding up.

I brushed off our clothes and Dinks said, Look. A swarm of bees was rolling across the pond. This globe of insects. Seething, pulsating, as if it was one huge creature. The bees stretched out into a sort of cone, turned and flew away from us towards the valley. And then, they disappeared. As if they'd gone through a hole in the sky. Like the flick of a switch had, you know, extinguished them.

Dinks said, I knew it. Invisibility in insects. I knew it was possible.

We squeezed back through the ti-tree. My body was light again but I still felt anxious. The sky had clouded over.

They'll have sent out a search party. Let's hurry. Don't tell anyone, darling, I begged. We're not feeling well at all. We don't know what we saw. Let's not remember it. But now I'm telling you, Arlitz.

It's our secret.

When we came out of the bush, the sky was clear and the sun shining, the picnic still in full swing. Dinks caught a tennis ball and threw it back into a cricket game.

What's wrong? said Grete. I thought you were going for a walk. Then she said, Giddy aunt, what happened to you?

We got a bit grubby.

No, I mean you look different. Your skin. It's kind of glowing.

Grubby? said Bern. That was a quick bit of mischief, you two. Ha ha. Happy birthday, mate, he said, whacking Dinks on the back.

I need to sit down, I said. Perhaps we could do the cake. What time do you make it?

Almost two, Grete said.

I wound the hands of my watch back the three hours we hadn't lost at all. Of course, I knew once he'd found them, once Dinks realised what they could do, he'd have to go back to the bees again and again. Didn't he, Arlitz?

Did he? Yes, I tell her. There's certainly something about bees. I move the stick-shift out of Park and into Neutral. My father had told me about bees when I sat on his lap crying from a sting. The bee doesn't mean it, he said. She's the symbol of the resurrection, the meek and the merciful, the emblem of Christ. My father squeezing the bulb out of my foot and holding me tight and the pain being a good thing. I was pretty sure my father hadn't mentioned that bees could fuck with the time continuum.

What's the time, Arlitz?

Lunch-time Miriam. Shall we?

I open Miriam's door and press her seatbelt button and we fight our way out of the sheet.

Are we here?

Yes, Miriam, I say. We're here. Welcome to the present.

Harvey standing by the bumper with his bloody notebook and wiping his eyes with his handkerchief.

## Conceal

Were you eavesdropping? I ask Harvey later, in his office.

Did hearing Miriam's story help you in any way?

I guess it reminded me that everyone keeps secrets. And that Miriam is living in la-la land.

What makes you say that?

Magic bees.

She might be telling the truth. Do you have a secret? Are you trying to conceal anything?

Only what's not there.

Somewhere in your past is a story you believe about yourself and I'd like to help you create a better one.

I'm losing the will to live here, Harvey.

That's not what I'm seeing. I think you're taking steps to reclaim your life.

I'll tell you something about concealing, Harv. Here's a story for you.

I tell him about my mother. Who only met you twice but called you 'That Nurse We Love'.

Straight out of school my mother trained as a make-up assistant. She worked in a department store for twenty years and that's where my father, searching for Brut, found her. Soon after my first haircut, my father bought her a cosmetic box and put it on the table like a Big Hint. The cosmetic box was the size of a toolbox. The trays swung out on struts. The cosmetics in it were for dead people.

Table, she said, when my father had left for a funeral director's conference in America.

And just like that, she returned to beautifying. She'd cleared the fruit bowl and replaced the tablecloth with a beach towel. I climbed onto the towel and lay down. She read aloud paragraphs from the *The Handbook of Desairology*. A desairologist is the proper name for someone who fixes up the hair and nails and faces of the dead, did you know? But my mother preferred to call herself a 'cosmetologist for the departed'. She

talked to my invisible bereaved relatives as if I was still alive: Good morning. On what side does she or he like her or his hair parted? Does she or he like to wear lipstick?

Analyse the client's body and recognise death, she read. I closed my eyes. She dabbed a sponge over my face and neck. A son can lie as still as a corpse just to feel his mother's fingers blending Fair Beige along his jawline.

When we got to the chapter on concealing cuts and contusions, I was only too happy to let her excavate a little chunk out of my arm with a razor blade. The pain was shocking but I knew a dead person shouldn't cry. She'd covered one edge of the blade with masking tape so she wouldn't cut herself. Once we'd stemmed the bleeding, she gently filled in my wound with morticians' wax.

A week later, my father flew back from Miami with another present for my mother. A Badger brand airbrush. I watched them pouring liquid foundation into the little reservoir and I knew the touching was over.

I can see Harvey thinks my mother is a lunatic and this makes me feel better.

Although the best he can come up with is: It's good you've kept track of this story so you can have a continuous self.

But a large piece of my life is missing. Not exactly missing. More *repeated*. It's almost as if I lived my life twice. Like two filmstrips placed on top of each other so that neither of them is entirely clear.

## Voice

You are lovely. Your hair is growing. Your nose is fine. Your ears. Your lips. Feel how I mark them out with Vaseline. I've been in this country long enough to know many foreign words. I collect them, look them up, their meanings. I've learnt your lips, like two fine foreign words.

When you breathed on your own, you were brought here. The doctors say most of your cortical activity is preserved. That's a good sign. You opened your eyes and haven't closed them again. And now you open your mouth for food. One less tube. Clever boy. You just need to find a way to come back. I'm going to put this nozzle in your mouth now. There'll be suction. Nothing to worry about. There. You seem to not know that night is for sleeping. I'm so curious about you. Waves tumbling through your brain. How tired you must be. What are you thinking?

It's strange but when I sit beside you, my brain separates a little from my body. Do you know that feeling of stepping apart from yourself? In that moment of wondering where *you* are, Arlitz, I always wonder, where the hell am I?

Harvey said you were a swimmer. He showed me a documentary about you. You could swim two lengths of a pool on one breath. Your mother made you sleep under water. You were only three. You didn't know it wasn't normal. You'll be okay, Arlitz. Close your eyes.

## Twilight

I'm writing this in the middle of the night. I woke up thinking I was drowning. It feels about two o'clock. I've never seen a clock here. No need to remind the inmates of the hours, I guess. Apart from Miriam. I open the curtains and look at the black hills across the valley and think of you. It never gets really dark here. A yellow-grey sky. Half a moon tonight, shedding this constant twilight over the garden. I wonder what the others are doing. Sleeping or crying or tearing their bed sheets into strips. I guess worrying



about other people is a good sign. Do you see the hum in my handwriting? The frenetic loops of my words.

## Fish

I wish you could have seen the video my grandmother showed me.

The documentarian said that when the child was three, the mother made him sleep with his face in a bowl of water.

Earlier than this, though, when he was a baby guppy, the mother would take him to the municipal baths, strip him and step down with him into the water. Then she would blow on his face and push him away from her, walking after him as he sank and fluttered. The mother propelled him ahead of her across the pool, submerged, his eyes wide and chlorine-filled and his fingers grasping for land. Then she would wrap her hands around his ribcage and lift him above the surface in time for him to spit up water and suck in oxygen. She'd toss him into the air and catch him. When he tired, she watched him fall asleep at the bottom of the pool and after a few minutes, kick to the surface to breathe. His instincts were cetaceous.

After their swim, the mother would stand on the side of the pool and twirl him, swing him around her head like a bullroarer, holding only his wrist. She had been told that the tossing and spinning and cold water would make him robust. She tried to ignore the thud of her son's shoulder joint dislocating and relocating.

Other mothers complained to the mother and also to the pool manager and although she could prove to them her baby was happy and never cried, eventually, the accusations of cruelty and abuse in addition to the other mothers' foul language meant she had to give up their daily exercise.

Later, while her son slept, she played him tapes of a woman speaking French, Italian and the language of his birthplace, Russian. She had taught him to turn his head from the water bowl as he slept, his dream-breath bubbling. He was a somnambulist swimmer crawling through the night sea. He tilted his nose and mouth clear of the pillowy water in rhythm with his fish ancestors. By the time he was four, a dark-haired, lazy-eyed boy, he could not speak a word of any language.

In the TV documentary entitled *The Fish Boy*, the documentarian asked the mother, Do you think the water may have injured your son?

The mother laughed and said, No, no, no, no! He has so many romance languages in his head. He just needs time to process.

But her framed face changed, as if, with the asking, there came a terrible comprehension. That her son would never speak and that the Russian doctor was a fraud and she had damaged her only child beyond salvation, a liquid glaze backstroking in his eyes, his brain cells become watery, cleansed of any thoughts. Poor boy, poor boy. He needed air, craved it, and his loving mother had deprived him. A tear ran out of the documentarian's eye. I suppose she was thinking about the responsibility of mothers and how a mother can make a child become anything.

This is you, Harvey says.

It's possible. I like water. And I do have an aptitude for holding my breath. And I was a very late talker, although I only speak English.

He sighs and puts his hand on my arm. Your mother was never an easy woman. I mean, I expect she wasn't. We need to construct a bridge from the old you to the new you.

A bridge? I say. Isn't a bridge a bad place to start given my history?

A bridge is exactly the right place to start.

Isn't it strange that we never shared stuff like this. Everything I know about you can fit into a calendar. I never told you my grandmother and my parents went halfway round the world to adopt me. Cross-culturally. I have no memory of my birth mother or birth country. I sometimes imagine I remember rows of cots, rows of bars, rows of ceiling tiles, rows of children in high chairs but that's only my Deprived Orphan fantasy. It's good to pretend you have even worse memories. I don't think I told you this even: I was born in water. It was coincidence that my adoptive family met the doctor who knew this because he'd birthed me and then that same doctor saved my life with water and that's why my mother went a little crazy with the water treatment when I was a toddler.

Tell me about that, says Harvey.

According to my grandmother, my mother got obsessed. Thought God had told her the doctor was a visionary. She was trying to do the right thing when she had no idea. Possibly post-adoptive traumatic stress. This doctor had taught midwives to labour

women in the sea. I've found photos. There's one of him standing in a school of sprats in conference around a woman's stomach. And one of him next to a smiling porpoise, a newborn's umbilical cord clamped in its teeth.

The doctor believed that humans have a sacred connection to the sea. He'd written a lot of papers. *Because people came from water, people belong in water and it is only the rupture of birth that forces a baby to breathe air.* He told my mother something like that. She read all his works and understood deep in her veins the absolute truth of his writing. She told my grandmother she actually had a memory of being a fish in a past incarnation. Her primitive consciousness *was* a fish. Basically, she fell in love with the doctor's credo. She tried to keep it a secret from my father but it's hard when your son is constantly wet.

Do you think your Dad tried to stop her?

I'm sure he did. But I liked it. I liked baths. I liked having my head under water and listening to my heart echoing off the enamel. I still do.

## Creative

You may be interested to hear I'm digging a hole. By the side fence under the brugmansia where the earth is soft and chalky. Putting myself in touch with the earth. The bell-flowers of the tree have shrivelled into the grass, only the spiky testicles of its seedpods remain. Already my Crocs are below ground. The shovelled dirt a pleasing pile around the hole.

Harvey and I have a conversation about motivation.

I say I'm content and he says he begs to differ. He says there's something niggling deep in my subconscious that's stopping me from moving forward.

What's so good about forward? I say.

What do you want, Arlitz?

You tell me, Harvey.

What everyone wants. To be loved.

So to make Harvey love me and also to shut him up, I'm moving forward. Well, moving downward. I was the only one not doing something creative. Of course, this letter is creative, but I mean crafty creative things like Miriam and Ilya. Ilya has a sketchbook he carries everywhere. A little tin paintbox and a retractable brush he wets with spit. Sable, he says. Finest hair. Miriam is making a giant insect out of wire. In memory of her lost husband. Entomology. Why? is the only question I can ask. How does a man love bugs?

Doctor Miriam, I say, is that a bee?

A moth.

Shouldn't an obstetrician be making giant uteruses?

Uteri, she says and goes back to twisting her moth proboscis. I won't even try for the plural of that.

Ilya's other creativity is gymnastics. He found crash mats in the Equipment Room and I helped him carry them down to the barn. Wooden rings hung on cables from the barn roof. A climbing rope as thick as my wrist. Wall ladders. A high bar apparatus bolted to the concrete floor. Parallel bars. And a pommel, a headless and tailless leather horse sporting two handles across its back. We'd never noticed this equipment before. Just the

workbench along the side wall and the covered station wagon at the far end by the roller door. Miriam and I fold the sheet off the car windscreen as if we are making a bed together and we sit in the front seat and watch Ilya working out. Having the glass between us and Ilya helps because he wears only his underwear. We are fascinated with his phenomenally hairy chest and his daggy Y-fronts and how his arm and leg scars stay together despite all the swinging. A testament to the durability of skin. When Hunapo comes back from her bushwalk, we shuffle along the bench seat. Ilya tries to swing his legs over the pommel and under his hands but he falls off. He climbs up and tries again and again and again until we are sick for him. The dinner gong is a blessing.

We should make him a medal or something, I say. Like the Olympics.

Harvey needs a medal, says Miriam.

Hunapo's creativity is medicine. Harvey has asked her about bedsores and she's steeped leaves in boiling water and made him a potion. Perhaps his wife is bedridden? Beside me, silent Hunapo smells like weed.

## Group

In Group, Harvey says: How we see things has a powerful effect on us. For instance, what do you see when you read these letters? On the whiteboard he writes NOWHERE.

Nowhere, we whisper.

So, says Harvey, nobody sees NOW HERE?

There is no gap, Ilya says.

The gap is your learning to see things differently.

So tell me, how am I supposed to see having no dick differently? I say. Of course, I don't say it out loud.

What you're saying is there's only one moment and it's eternity and it is NOW, says Miriam, beaming.

Yes, says Harvey. Absolutely right. Our past and our present and our future are completely tied up.

I'm looking at the sign on the Rainy Day Recreation Room noticeboard that reads: *Come for the Present, Relive the Past, Launch into a Future* when Hunapo speaks for the first time.

My history is in front of me, she says, because that's the thing I know. The future's behind me because that's unknown. I can turn my head to try to get a look at it, but it stays unknown.

I turn my head to get a look at her and think maybe I'd like to try having a future if Hunapo's in it.

The only thing in front of me is sadness, she says.

I don't want it to be.

I'd like to help you believe, Harvey says, that if you tell yourself better stories about your past, you can have brighter prospects.

I can tell none of us are convinced.

We all look down and wish we were in the gap between nowhere until Hunapo says: I used to keep dogs.

Wonderful, says Harvey.

They didn't belong to me. I didn't even like dogs. It was my business. I untied them from outside shops and tempted them out of gardens and took them home in my boyfriend's van. I marked down the letterbox numbers and sent the owners ransom notes. I rang the pound and asked if anyone was looking for, like, a bijon frieze because I'd found one wandering and I'd talk real sweet to them so they'd give me the owner's number. I'd look up the newspapers in the library, the Lost and Found, then fold up the pages and stick them under my coat 'cause I needed them to line cages.

WE HAVE YOUR DOG. PUT \$300 IN A PLASTIC BAG. I wrote or texted them and told them where to leave the cash. Sometimes I asked for five hundred. I did really bad spelling. I'd tie the dog to a bench in a park and call the owner once the money was in the bag. I liked to watch the reunion from behind a tree, the face of the owner and the face of the dog lighting up in recognition and something else. Then I'd go spend the money on junk food, a new sim card, and a giant bag of kibble.

Hunapo shows us a scar in the web of her thumb.

This retriever was running towards its owner, right, *Hiya Boy!* then it changed its mind, came running back to me behind the tree and grabbed my hand and tried to fetch me back to the van. I had to run like stink away from its owner.

Have you noticed how the wounded always have to create a scenario that explains their scars in an exciting light. A dog running back to claim you.

We realise after that Ilya has left the room. I wonder if Ilya's letter will answer the exciting question we all want to ask - *What the hell happened to you?*

## Garden

Harvey lets us outside. A couple of pukeko strut through the garden. Miriam mimes a rifle and takes them out. Has anyone seen my gun? she says. Ilya says Yah! and the pukekos sprint under the fence wire. We stand around the topsoil examining the green shoots coming up. We're not very good at socializing. We know these are our bodies



we're standing in, they seem familiar but it's like we don't really know ourselves. So we think mainly about ourselves, trying to figure ourselves out. None of us have got the energy to extend much to other people. Perhaps we don't need anybody else. We all prefer to stay in one spot, watch the window, read the same page over and over. It's like we're trying to get acquainted again with the world we're in.

Well, here we are, I say. Up the boohai shooting pukekos with a long handled spade.

Everyone looks so miserable I kick off one of my yellow Crocs and grab it and wrestle it into submission on the grass.

Stand back, inmates, I say. I make my accent American swampy. This Croc reminds me of my days in Gatorville, on the everglades. Three shows a day. Lost my wanger to a gator named Precious. Damn gator thought I had a Number 12 chicken in my pants.

How close I come to the truth. I get the Croc to grab me and spin me in a death roll. Then I make a big show of managing to pull the attacking shoe from my throat and leap to my feet. Well, Big Yella, it's handbag time for you, I say. Ilya shakes his head. I think I see Hunapo smile a little. I slide the shoe strap over my wrist and ponce down the property towards the barn. Miss Lays, look at my new handbag, I shout. Don't die from jealousy now I've saved you from being chicken dinners.

Are you surprised I can do light relief? For a moment I remember a me who is funny.

Why do you call me Inmates? Miriam asks when I'm back up the hill.

## Problem

If you could see photos of me when I was in high school you'd understand why boys hated me, I tell Harvey. I was slight and unblemished with puppy eyes. Girls either wanted to pat me or pretend-punch me. *It's not fair! How come a boy got those eyelashes and lips!* Another child, with a drive to the masculine pursuits of the sports field, may not have been subjected to ridicule but I preferred to spend school lunchtimes reading or sunning my legs with the girls in the quad. Can you picture it? A line of roman sandals tapping to the drama room radio. Passing rugby boys would pull off my sandals and throw them, and my pack, into the cutty grass at the back of the school.

How did that make you feel?

I knew he was going to ask that. I learned to laugh a lot. The names of my adolescence were Poofster, Faggot and Queer. How I felt was, I couldn't deny those names. The girls yelled at the rugby boys to leave me alone. They hugged me and named me their honorary sister.

Harvey is going to say this was a story I told myself but I wonder how I could I have written a different one. All of this happened without me trying.

Are you gay? he says.

I was made to think so. My voice was high until I was sixteen. And I did begin to act in this over-the-top, camp way. I dressed in kilts and high-heeled boots and wore mascara and eyeliner and lip gloss. My father blamed my mother, naturally, and prayed a lot. My mother said, His birth mother abandoned him. Blame her why don't you. Even when hair grew in my cruxes, when my throat and dick thickened, it was too late. I'd already been perceived as too feminine.

So even though you weren't sure you were gay, you were stuck with this feminine self-image?

I guess I didn't have any hopefulness. Or resilience. My own body kind of emasculated me.

We're going to look for times when you have been hopeful and resilient. And Arlitz, your body isn't responsible. Your problem evolves from the culture we live in. Your problem story could be that you can't remain true to the values of society. If you

feel you have the right to live as a whole man, then you have every right to be depressed.  
Do you feel that?

That I have a right to be a whole man? You're kidding, right?

I'd like to give you a more optimistic orientation. You are not the problem, Arlitz.  
The problem is the problem.

I don't have a problem with that, I say.

I'd like to tell Harvey my dreams are evolving in a different culture altogether.  
Possibly Russia. I wonder, perhaps, if not the humming, then the collective dream? Do  
we all hear the woman storyteller in the night? Promising a story about Nina?

## Still

You are digging your grave?

Ilya, his underwear thankfully inside his clothes. The hole does seem to be taking on the dimensions of a grave. Some kind of muscle memory, perhaps.

Never call a hole a grave, I say.

In my mother country graves are only dug in summer time. Ground other times is ice. You will lie down in it?

Something like that, mate.

I'm going to dig up potatoes.

Good on you.

Instead he sits down on the pile of dirt and says, My father made vodka from potatoes.

No kidding.

His vodka was inferior to mine. I bought my first still here, in a garage sale, from a Spaniard. He and I were both immigrants and it would have been nice to share a drink. But. The Spaniard had built the still with his own hands. I could see it was a work of love. He had twisted the copper coil. Beaten the chamber into the shape of an onion. *Adios, amigo*, I said, the only Spanish I knew. He began to weep. He was relocating to one room in his daughter's house where alcohol was forbidden. He stroked that still one last time. You could see where the little dents from his hammer had trodden all over the bulb like flamenco. I felt like a thief. I was stealing the pieces of himself he had left there in his labour. The comings and goings of his heart and muscles. And something more.

I know what you mean. I look down at my labour in the soil, today and yesterday flattened by my shovel.

The still I set up in my shed behind our house. My wife Nina said it reminded her of the cupolas on churches in the country we had left behind. It also reminded her of the bargain I failed to get from the Spaniard. She was a hard woman to appease.

Hang on? Nina? I say. Do you hear a woman in your dreams talking about Nina?

My second wife? No. Well, not legally my wife. Nina and I never married. She was married to a foreigner who worked in the mine near our village. He was from here.

A geologist. Ross kindly brought me also to this country when I was in some financial trouble. But. When he discovered his son was in reality my son, he, what do you say, *shot through*. My second son. He's a good boy. He liked to make crazy faces in the metal onion. He made me laugh. A teenaged boy can still be a child. He always came into my shed to say goodnight. I'd turn on the fan to blow out the fumes, and he'd look at the sketches and poems on my shed wall. I wasn't embarrassed because he was young and it wasn't broad daylight. Sitting in a shed in the twilight, business going on around you, a man can think *what the hell, what have I got to hide?* I would have liked to be a painter. I kept a sketchbook and a box of charcoal twigs, a can of fixative in case the urge took me. I had a folder of drawings I did from memories. Drawings of animals and trees and one picture of my first son, with his cousin, doing a jigsaw puzzle. I remember that winter. Everything was changing. Once, I showed my son a drawing I'd done of a shack in the trees and I explained to him how I had left gaps in the white paper to show snow on the roof and branches. Things like this interest me. Not having to draw snow. The snow in my picture not existing until I drew the shapes around it. Here, I said, the paper shines through and does the work for you. Suggests every flake.

Sometimes it's what you leave out that says a lot.

I agree. *Like filling up a silence*, my son said. Yes, I said to him, yes, stupid tears coming to my eyes. My son stood without talking, watching the vodka somersaulting in the coil.

Ilya shakes his head.

Arlitz, I also would have liked to be a poet. But. There is nothing that shows the labour of a writer's hands. Only the exertion of his thoughts in the reader's head. Now I have too many memories that will eat through paper. Too much heart and brain. Too much humanness I am not proud of.

What do you mean?

A long time ago, I trapped and killed mink and sable for their fur. Do you think the rich women in St Petersburg opened their closets and observed the way my hands tore the pelts from the animals just so?

He brushes his fists together.

Could they read, in the linings of their boots, the slickness of my knife? The remorseless heart of Ilya the Siberian? Did their coats and shapky show them the human in me? Truly, there is nothing to show of my labour in the work I left behind. I am glad of this.

I don't think you have to beat yourself up about it, I say. While I'm wondering if it was a knife fight that messed up his face. Or a really pissed-off mink.

In our old country they say, *Man drinks to celebrate but quenches his sorrow with vodka*. Sometimes I wish for the comfort of a drink but then I remember. Vodka is the root of my sorrow. Potatoes! Excuse me!

He jumps up and heads for his vegetable patch.

So, the Siberian is deeper than this hole. Who'd have thought. Perhaps that's why we're here in Furry Moyra. All of us suffering from too much humanness.

## Digging

Of course Harvey tries to analyse me. The digging. He stands beside the brugmansia like he wants to object. I can't help thinking of that saying about lambs frolics under the eye of the butcher, unaware of their fate.

Making a grave, Arlitz?

No.

A hangi?

Yes, that's it.

You know digging is a metaphor for escape?

Keep digging into my psyche, Harv. You might hit rock bottom.

I wonder if you think you're acknowledging your physical abuse.

You mean getting some sort of fulfilment from scarring the earth that scarred me. I'm way ahead of you. Or this. Digging a hole is my rite of passage. You know, the manhood thing I never had.

Do you think that?

I think you ask a lot of questions. Can't you just be happy that this is new for me? Usually, I feel the urge to do something and lie down until the urge goes away.

I'll leave you to it. If you come across anything, let me know, would you. He walks down to the chicken coop where the hens are pecking their own stories in the dust before destroying them with their breasts and feet.

Once you said I was more like a bird than a man. Did you mean chicken? Did you not believe the patients you nursed, those people trying to rewrite the disease out of their pneumatic bones, were the strongest people you'd ever met?

Digging is not new for me. I lied about that. It's in my bones. When I turned sixteen, my father insisted I take a holiday job at the Oak Sea Cemetery and Crematorium. He was the supervisor there.

My mother had graduated to funeral director's assistant at another funeral home altogether. Well if you kill him, don't expect me to do his make-up. She said it in a way that meant she couldn't wait to do my make-up.

## **Grave**

Show him the ropes, Wade my father said.

Wade did. I helped him loop the ropes on stakes around a grave and lay out sheets of plywood to stop anyone falling in. Wade had DEATH written on both sets of knuckles and a streak that reminds me now of the urologist. A lack of empathy bordering on sociopathic. Perhaps a mother who never touched him.

Grave-digging was hard on wrists that had been twisted like windmills and were prone to dislocation but my father was making a man of me. I persisted and by the third summer I'd grown taller and developed shoulders and calluses. I liked unloading the planks and laying out the grave template. I became an expert at cutting in with the spade and rolling aside the layers of turf. I learned never to call the grave a hole. I learned always to call a corpse a loved one.

I remember one day when we were resting up by the oaks. We'd dug five graves that day, me on the shovel, Wade on the backhoe. The last grave was a standard one in the good dirt on the side of the hill with the oaks above it and a view of the memorial garden and columbarium and the artificial pond. I thought the dead could care less about water lilies and fountains. It cost an arm and a leg to be buried up there. It was actually surprising I hadn't broken an arm and a leg. Wade thought it was amusing to swing the boom and knock me over with the backhoe bucket at least once per grave. I've fallen into a lot of graves.

The loved one was Chinese. It was a rule to sight the death certificate. We had to know if the loved one had AIDS or TB or something we could catch. I started calculating how much an arm and a leg would cost but then the hearse was coming up the hill and I was distracted by the whites and blues and greens of the funeral party. The hearse was towing along the mourners by a white streamer. Some of the men walked with their foreheads stuck to the hearse.

When they reached the gravesite, the attendants pulled out the casket and placed it on the lowering device straps. The hearse drew away and the mourners moved in. On the outskirts young boys were flicking lighters and setting fire to wads of money. Little explosions of flame and then curling bank notes.

What's that about? I said to Wade.

Hell money. It's not real. They burn paper stuff, paper houses, cars, animals, all the junk they want to go to the afterlife.

The breeze picked up ash flakes and floated them towards the crematorium like black snow. On the same breeze, Chinese words carried along to us. They sounded like a telling-off. The priest started waving a joss stick and then took off the brake on the lowering device the way Wade had shown him and the casket started submerging. All the mourners turned together to face away from the grave.

They can't look at the loved one going into the ground, Wade said.

Well, not now, obviously, I said. Wade chipped his shovel into my calf.

People took turns to pick up a handful of dirt from the dirt tray and lob it into the grave. Then the mourners began heading down to the carpark. There was a lot of spitting on the grass. One man stopped for a moment to scrape some dirt out of the grave into a



cup. The priest spoke to him and he shook his head. They watched the man spit three times and walk away fast. The mourners got into their expensive cars and drove away.

I picked up my shovel and followed Wade down to the grave site. The back of his coat was chalky with dirt where he had been leaning on the backhoe.

The priest was still hanging around. He smelt of the girls at school who burnt sandalwood in the drama room.

Please, you open, the priest said, waving his hand at the grave. Money for me is in there.

I don't think so, mate, said Wade. He stabbed his shovel into the grass.

The priest explained and we finally understood that the dead woman's sons hadn't known the protocol. The money the relatives paid for the priest's service should have gone in a donation box. By mistake, the cash had gone into the casket. The elder son had offered him five hundred dollars but the priest wanted to see the envelopes.

You want me to open the casket?

Yes. It is my right.

Hang on, I don't actually think it's your *right*. It's illegal. Wade was silent for a long minute. He looked around. But we'll do it for five hundred. Five hundred dollars, okay?

Yes, okay. Please. The priest was nodding and nodding.

I bet there's five hundred gobs of spit on these mats.

Arl, shut up and concentrate, Wade said. No one's watching. Go now.

It would always be me going down into the grave. That's just the way it was.

I rested my shovel on a headstone and hung my white coat on the handle so it looked like I was leaving my ghost behind. I held onto the stand of the lowering device and swung over the edge, hung for a moment, looked down and for at least the tenth time in my life thought, I don't like falling. I dropped onto the casket lid. When I stood up, my head was still above ground.

Get down, said Wade.

The casket was a three-humped rectangle covered in red velvet and squares of yellow and white paper. There was only enough room for me to stand heel to toe between the grave wall and the casket. It was a perfectly dug grave. The bands of the earth sliced

through like cake. Despite the sprinkled dirt everywhere, I felt bad about my boot prints on the velvet. I tried to smooth them out. I had to keep thinking to stop thinking about where I was.

I can't open it.

You have to take the pegs out.

I had meant I didn't *want* to open it. Wade explained where to look, but the son of a funeral director already knows these things. I knew, for instance, that it was a casket because coffins have six edges, wide at the shoulders, narrow at the toe. I put my hand into the sky and Wade put a multi-tool in it. It was hard to crouch sideways and prise out the metal pegs but I managed without cutting myself. The grave wall was cool against my shoulder. I thought about all the broken-down things earth is made of - mountains, trees and bodies. Then, don't ask me why, some kind of pica induced by trauma, I took a knob of clay from the grave wall and chewed it up. I wondered if I had eaten a part of a grave or if the grave was only the name of the space around me. I remember thinking it was strange that things that didn't exist had words to describe them. Grave, hole, space. Was a grave just a feeling? I put my toe under the rim of the casket lid and took a breath and pushed it back on its hinges.

The casket foamed with quilting. There was a yellow silk square over the loved one's head but it had drifted sideways so I could see half her wax face. I tilted the loved one's collar and saw the stitched hole where they had stuck in a tube and swapped her blood for chemicals. I imagined the cosmetologist spraying her with sealant. Painting the wrong foundation over her bloated hands so they were more orange than flesh. I knew, from the Handbook of Desaiology, there were old lady bruises under the makeup. The blooms of death. The loved one was clasping a broken comb. Chemical came out of the pillows and linings and I gagged a little on the smell of it. Her neck was formaldehyded to twice the regular size. I can't describe the smell. Pickle and chlorine. I remembered holding my baby breath in a chlorinated swimming pool while my baby cells dilated. I remembered my baby heart beating in my head.

There was a light blue cloth over the loved one's torso. In piles where they had slid to each side of her were rice cakes and about fifty little red and gold envelopes. The loved one's feet, in white socks, were tied together.

Why are her feet tied together? My voice echoed off the earth walls.

How the fuck should I know. Hurry up.

I dropped the pegs onto the loved one's pillow and hurried up to fill my hands with envelopes. Wade had to keep leaning down into the grave to collect them all. It was difficult because Wade had his eyes shut the whole time. He couldn't look at the buried loved one.

There's cakes in here.

Don't talk to me. I don't want bad luck.

I looked up at Wade's boots and saw the priest's back. He looked like a headstone. I thought, bad luck is all right for me then, is it. I ate one of the little cakes and rice grains moulded with the clay in my back teeth. I pretended I was eating a pudding my mother baked and this made me sad because my mother never made puddings. I used the yellow silk to flick away the crumbs I'd dropped on the loved one who was somebody's good mother. Her lips were apart and her mouth was crowded with glass teeth. I looked hard at my bad luck, then picked up the yellow silk by a corner and floated it over the loved one's whole face. Abracadabra. Her red lipstick kissed my hand and I rubbed my knuckles on my trousers. I didn't want death written on them.

Come *on*, Arl, yelled Wade.

I was sorry for her, somebody's mother, having to stay down in that drab cellar, never to see the sky or her family again.

I'm sorry for your loss, I whispered to her and I brought down the casket lid and stood on it and pulled myself up a lowering strap onto the fake grass mat, safe in the air again. I wanted badly to wash my hands, snort the embalming fluid out of my nostrils.

The priest had opened the envelopes and was stuffing his wallet with fifty and hundred dollar notes. He handed five hundreds to Wade who was scanning the cemetery. There was no-one about. The group by the memorial pond had gone. Wade and the priest shook hands. The priest spat three times as he crossed the road and went quickly down the hill.

Wade flicked the empty envelopes into the grave.

I should of said more. There was thousands in there.

There's thousands in her, I said. I'd stopped gasping. Someone stuffed her mouth full of jewels.

What?

In her mouth, jewels.

Man, I heard they do that, said Wade. Treasure for the afterlife. I guess we're going back down.

I knew when Wade said we're, he meant you're.

I'm not that keen, eh Wade. It stinks.

Oh, you're going, mate. Buried fucken treasure. He whacked a crumb off my chin. Don't eat the rice cakes, will ya. They're for the underworld dogs.

That was the first and last time I robbed a grave. Wade wouldn't let me out until I'd unscrewed the casket handles, too. I didn't think I would ever forget hooking the pearls and rubies and emeralds out of a loved one's mouth and I was right. It's impossible not to think of her jaw under the yellow cloth, the noise it made when I cracked it open with the heel of my hand.

Spit, said Wade, so I did.

There was a piece of hell money stuck to my white coat. I picked it off. It was charred but I could read the English printed on it: *The Bank of Heaven Company Ltd.* Wade picked up the casket handles and jogged off through the headstones to get the backhoe, his pockets chicketty-chicking with tiny rubies and sapphires and pearls.

I shovelled dirt into the grave and I thought, Heaven for me is now out of the question.

## Idea

Ilya got the whole coffin idea from my digging. I was the spark. Ilya asked for wood. He set himself up at the far end of the barn with sawhorses and tools. I wandered in to watch.

What are you planning?

Coffin.

Oh. Your own coffin?

For sure. Every man needs a coffin. You young ones, you think, what do we need with coffins?

I never thought that. I have thought that none of us here is scared of death, so a coffin isn't a frightening prospect. We each might have called a coffin 'home' earlier than this.

I think, Arlitz, you are trying to be closer to the unborn and the dead.

Is that right? And what exactly are you trying to get closer to, Ilya? You're the one building a coffin. What are you looking for?

What I'm looking for, I can't get back. It's too late for me. Go. Get back in your hole. Dig. Find where you come from.

When I go back to my hole, I find this note at the bottom. Ilya's handwriting:

*A still is hushed and silent. A still is unmoving. A still is a picture. A still is to appease and pacify. A still is to put an end to. Still what?*

I fold up the note and stick it into a cleft and lift a few shovels of dirt.

## Honey

It was hard to make a deep, narrow grave by hand. Unmake the earth. Wade and I had dug it that morning, in the urupa, where the backhoe couldn't reach. A shaft for a casket the shape of a fridge carton. Filling it in was our last job. The sky was orange with sunset and the memorial pond looked like juice. I found a girl sitting on the clay inside the picket fence. She was crying.

My koro, she said, twisting a spray of leaves in her fingers above the red box. He's the only real family I've got.

This girl was stunning. Even with her mascara all melted from crying and her black draggy jumper and dirty jeans. I mean, if there were angels. I had to hold my spade handle in front of my crotch. It was a surprise.

Sorry for your loss, I said, like an idiot.

Then Wade came back from his smoke and jumped over the fence

It's pretty hard, eh, losing a koro, he said. Where's your whanau?

Partying. I don't have much to do with them. Bad blood and that. They were scared of Koro anyway. He was a tohunga.

What's that?

A priest. I have to stay 'til he's properly buried. 'Til his spirit's gone.

Sure, sure you do, said Wade, nice as pie. What's your name?

Honey.

I'm Wade. This is a poof I work with. Ignore him.

We took off our white coats and after a while, Wade took off his shirt so I had to watch the seriously badly-tattooed dog head on his back, flexing its jaw as Wade heaved clay onto Honey's koro's grave. Every chance I got, I looked at Honey. While we released her grandfather's spirit with dirt, she sang. A mournful sobbing little prayer. There was a perfect circle of her skin showing through the hole in her greenstone pendant.

We smoothed the grave mound and wiped off our sweat with our coats.

It's getting dark, said Wade, and your koro wouldn't want you out here with the wairua wandering around.

Can you take me to the shops? I have to get a taxi.

We could take you home, I said. You shouldn't be by yourself.

Do you have a car?

I've got a car, said Wade. He can't even drive yet.

I can.

He scowled at me. Don't think you're coming.

Honey washed her hands in the curved stone outside the urupa gate.

I want him to come, she said.

I washed my hands and Wade did too and Honey flicked a bit of water on us with her leaves. The wooden statue that held the bowl looked through me with its glass eyes. I was expected home but I helped stack the shovels in the shed and I got into the back of Wade's car. He drove fast, Honey directing us north through the suburbs. The casket handles in Wade's boot clanging against each other at every turn.

This is mine now, Honey said.

An old state house in a street of them. Wade parked under the carport on her cracked-up driveway.

The family want it but Koro left it to me.

I sat with my leg pressed against hers on the old sofa while she cried again. Then Wade turned on the TV and muscled in and told me to get us some dinner. In Honey's tidy kitchen, I found bread and savoury luncheon and potato chips and eggs. I boiled the eggs and made toast and Honey said, Not that chair, so I sat in the other one and we ate, the faint sulphury smell of death hanging around. I buttered the toast into fingers like my mother did when I was Masha, and I reckoned it was comforting for Honey to sit holding the warm shell, dipping her soldiers in.

Wade got a bottle of rum out of his car. And his stash. I didn't ring my parents because there was no phone. I smoked some of the joint Wade gave me and liked it. I spent a long time picking all the specks of pea and carrot out of my savoury luncheon.

I don't even know why I'm letting you smoke, Honey said. Koro hated it. He might come and haunt you.

And even though her grandfather was dead, she laughed.

I don't remember falling asleep but I woke up in a chair feeling sick as a pig. I'd only had one brain-altering substance before in my life and that was a glass of wine. I

went looking for the toilet and found the dead old tohunga's tidy bed and dresser. I opened the next door. Wade was sitting on Honey's bed, sitting on Honey's hips, laying a track of jewels from her bra to her navel.

Ruby, he said. Something green.

Emerald.

Yeah, emerald like your eyes.

They're brown, man.

I say they're green.

Honey saw me and sat up and the jewels tipped towards Wade's crotch. I went outside and threw up under a pear tree. Over the knobs of hard dead pears.

Later, I told my mother I was sorry for going awol. I've been with a girl I said.

You don't even like girls, she shouted.

She told me that and I believed it was true. But I was sure I'd fallen in love with Honey. I don't think she even knew my name.

Wade has a boot full of casket handles, I told my father.

My father didn't call the police as I'd hoped. He simply forgave Wade for robbing graves, blessed him and fired him. I was taken out of the cemetery and put to work where my father could keep an eye on me. Behind the chapel, in the crematorium with Blue. Blue was Wade's younger brother.

I'm not convinced you're not connected with this stealing racket but I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, my father said to Blue.

I told you, he's the black sheep, sir, Blue said. I didn't know anything about it. I'm clean.

I believed Blue when I saw him tipping gravel out of the cremulator into a box. He swept in every last bit of ash and then he blew in a kiss and said, Go hard, before he sealed up and labelled the loved one's bones.

Do you know Honey? I said.

Yeah, she's cool.

She's lovely. Too lovely for your brother.

I reckon.



And we looked wistfully into the furnace peephole, at the fire roaring over a casket, turning its occupant to calcium and smoke.

## Coffins

I tell Miriam that Ilya is building a coffin.

Her eyes light up. Who is? She's sitting on the grass beside the hole and trimming Letitia's feathers with secateurs and she throws the hen off her lap, stands and recites: A coffin is a small domain, yet able to contain, a citizen of paradise, in its diminished plane.

That's very good, Miriam.

I don't remember who said it.

She charges downhill and leans over the front fence and starts pulling willow branches towards her. I was under the misconception the fences were electrified. Adding to my entrapment theory. I take a break from digging and hold my arms out for the cut branches.

A basket casket? I say. Seems right for a Miriam. Moses and all that.

We're all going to make coffins, Arlitz, aren't we. And we'll put ourselves into them. Not our bodies, I mean our *selves*.

Don't you think death is interesting, Miriam? Let me stand in geographies that bring me close to death. I don't remember who said that either. Tie me to the track, lean me over the safety barrier, bury me up to the chin below the high water mark, put a muzzle in my mouth.

Oh dear, says Miriam.

Perhaps there is no edge, no safety barriers and the world goes on forever and when you fall, you just get absorbed by all the other molecules and they hold you up. Why did you come to Furry Moyra, Miriam?

I had a fall. I'm a bit confused.

Me too. Have you ever woven anything before?

I knitted you a jumper once. It was hopeless. She passes me two twisted branches.

I bet Hunapo knows how to weave, I say.

I don't know her.

Yes you do. You can't miss her.

A hen pecks around the fencepost.

Is that Lilian? The brown one?

They're all brown, Miriam.

It turns out the willow's too perverse to weave, even after soaking, so Miriam says cane would be better and the next day, when we gather en masse around Harvey in the barn, there's a huge sheaf of cane stakes circled inside a tub of water, drowned with bricks.

Harvey takes it on board, the coffin idea, immediately claims it as his own. 'The Coffin Project' he names it. I thought he might have been upset that some of us are planning for another death so soon after a reprieve from the first but luckily Harvey sees coffin-making as some kind of collective breakthrough.

The building and shaping of coffins, the sanding and nailing and weaving of them, that will be a healing experience, he says. The therapy of craft. And the coffin become your legacies of course. Harvey spreads out his hands. Your lives writ large upon them.

Ilya arranges his sawhorses and saws through a plank of pine. Miriam is following a blueprint Harvey's copied off for her. She lies the cane stakes in a pattern on the concrete.

Something that represents your life, says Harvey.

A kennel? I say. A trap?

Maybe you should dig a little longer and something will come to you.

I kneel and help Miriam weaving under and over.

## Voices

*Always remember he's a person. A person requiring love, empathy, the escape of sleep. One entity.*

We adhere to another person. Cleave. The word with two meanings. One, to fuse. One, to split. Where are you now, Arlitz? I've watched you dreaming. We're all locked in. Hold on. When the time is right, you'll escape.

*Sing to him to give him peace and memory.*

I have something from your memory. A torn piece of wallpaper Harvey said he found folded in your pocket. Some of the words are in halves or missing their beginnings and endings, unclear. A foreign poem. When I sing the wallpaper words, even the cut-through parts - *ath owfla erfe* - the secret of them, something good strikes at my heart, something familiar and human. Tree, heart, water, bone - these are the elementary words that underpin us. Or pin us under. Do you know what I mean, Arlitz?

*It's said our unconscious surfaces when we dream, when we create art, when we go mad. In another life, he's becoming an artist. He's dreaming of a better future because his past has turned him a little mad.*

How much bad past can you have, a boy like you? All your scars are new. Once you sat up and let out a roar. We smiled. Harvey's wife, Lilian has a scar. She was born with a cleft lip.

*Why do I keep him alive in a life like this? Do you want to know why I don't assist him with dying?*

On the Glasgow Scale you're a six. I hope for you more than this life of gape-mouthed, silt-food greyness. I hope this is the worst you'll ever be.

*Because he does have a life. You know about the particle of light that can be in two places at once? The quantum possibilities of looping time? What if I could harness another reality? Give him a concurrent life.*

Is that possible?

*It is.*

What wakes me is not the sun or the swelling curtains looking for a mooring, but soap. The smell of foam and lily and iris. I'm sure I've heard that only dogs can smell in dreams. Is that ironic?

I lie in bed until I smell breakfast and hope I'm not the worst. The person the others are glad they're not. The one that makes them hope for themselves because they haven't fallen that far. I hope I'm not the inmate that presents others with the prestige of being slightly better.

Miriam is Lilian, my grandmother, I say to Harvey.

No one can be entirely sure of anything, Harvey says. There are all sorts of possibilities.

So why did she tell me the story of my parents and her going to adopt a baby named Masha?

Is that the story you wanted to hear?

I've heard it before. Only there was no Masha in it. My life is starting to make more sense. Not this bit right now, which is confusing the hell out of me, but the past. A mother expecting a girl and coming home, somehow, with a boy. What a disappointment. I thought you said rewriting your past is healing. Make better stories, you said. Frankly, this sucks.

## Dreams

We are sitting in the lounge minding our own business when Harvey says: What worries you most, patients, about leaving here?

I've already told them the story of the guy who did try to leave here, Harvey. The inmate who wanted to become an outmate, remember guys?

Everyone nods because their mouths are full of tea or biscuits. This guy had crawled under the fence and Harvey's security system had blown him sky-high. Just a pair of orange Crocs left smouldering on the driveway. I don't know why I told them that. Why I made up some lore for the memoryless Furry Moyra. Was I just trying to scare them because I was worried my friends, my *friends*, would climb the fence and leave me? I hope that Harvey doesn't really have some deadly deterrent in place. That the relentless humming in my ears isn't some sort of electrified field.

Yes, thank you Arlitz. What worries you most about leaving here?

No-one can answer that question because none of us have any intention of leaving. So instead Harvey asks us about our dreams.

Do you have a dream you recognise as your brain trying to come to grips with something in your past?

Since I've been in Furry Moyra, I say, I've only had one dream. Not really a dream. It's a woman talking to me. She knows my name. Plus you're in it Harvey. Your voice is. I don't see anything. Just white. It's like I'm flying. Or falling. Or the room is. God knows which part of my subconscious she's coming from.

Harvey grabs his notebook and starts writing like a maniac. Dreams are surfacing memories, he says.

But this is something else, Harv. A woman talking to me from the other side of a sheet hung in a doorway. As if I'm an idiot. A child. And she sings to me. Some song about an echoless point. It's not a dream and not a memory. Something else.

Miriam can't remember dreaming. I fell out of the sky once, she says. I was flying. You remember, Arlitz. You were there.

Was I?

Yes, you remember, you brought me back.

Back where?

I'm not certain Arlitz has a memory of that, Miriam dear, Harvey says.

My dream is also falling, says Ilya. Nightmare. I fall from a rope. This happened to me actually. The bones came through the skin. He rolls up a pants leg and points out another scar.

You're putting me off my tea and biscuit, I say. What's your dream, Hunapo?

Rolling down a hill in a van. I just keep going over and over.

We all have a tendency to falling, then.

Falling dreams are about feeling a loss of control says Harvey. You've all showed me your strength. You all are here. You're fighting back. You're all going to make it.

You held me up, Arlitz, says Miriam. We were flying over the meadow and all the hills were like cross-hatched drawings and you were laughing.

## Master

I saw it pinned to the noticeboard outside the orderlies' room. *Personal assistant required by bi male. Must be willing to serve.*

At my father's funeral, my mother hugged me and said: It should have been you, Arlitz. She wasn't thinking straight. I wanted to remember how it felt not to think. To be in someone's complete power.

I liked you at the first interview and loved you by the third. You told me canine role play was among your fetishes and I knew what you meant. I dreamed of wolves so it felt only natural, although I shook like a chihuahua the day I stood in your showerbox, your calm hand on my shoulder. The loving way you shaved me. So careful and attentive, resting the blade for a moment behind my ear, in my armpit, while you kissed the spaces you'd planed. I asked if it would be all right to touch you and I wiped the foam off your mouth with my thumb. You thought you were humiliating me – you didn't know that being hairless gave me a spark. The sound of the little key as you turned it in the lock of my new collar made me cry with happiness.

Thank you Master. I meant it. What I think about every day is coming to find you.



## Bridge

When I think of my father, I imagine him on a bridge. The bridge is suspended across a white room and it is swinging. My father balances, unsteady in his green-basted gown, while behind him, outside where he once placed his feet, the land crumbles. He's just become acquainted with the disease in his bones. You might die, they tell him. Yet hope emanates from him. The kind of hope the healthy never know. It floats in the white room. There is no despair. Dread has been extracted through the ceiling grilles. The new air is optimistic, filtered and pure. My father breathes it in. With small, benevolent sighs he fortifies himself for the journey. The bridge is unfinished. My father waits for the next plank to be secured to the strung ropes. It will appear like a gift, he knows it. In fact, he's certain the plank will be laid before his next footfall. I try to tell him it's not certain but he looks back at me, back to the place he stepped off, the machete edge of the earth where his old life ended and shakes his head. In the distance, across the ravine, he believes he can see land. If he can summon the energy, he will reach it. He steps.

What happened first to my father was the humming in his head. You'd know this symptom, the sound of anaemia, his heart brightly trying to pump airless blood back to his lungs. He was too exhausted to carry a casket. His shins turned to bruises. He pissed blood.

I found an image photographed through a scanning electron microscope. It seems bone marrow is an undersea rockery constantly blooming with red and white anemones. My father lay in the hospital and I showed him what normal uniform blood cells look like magnified five hundred thousand times.

Visualise this, I said. In the fat of your bones, the daughters of stem cells are deciding their shape – platelets, basophils, neutrophils.

His blood didn't look anything like the photo. The red and white cells crowded out by immature blasts shaped like mutant doughnuts.

The doctors began the process of killing off all my father's fast-growing cells. Leukaemia cells, hair cells, throat cells, too. The inside of his cheeks sloughed off. I got a job as an orderly so I could see him every day. Every day turned out to be fifty days. The daughters in his bones failed. A fungus ate away his lungs.

A few days before he died, I wheeled him and his dripstand to the chapel. It's not a revelation the chapel is on the same floor as the haematology ward. There's quiet and a view. I started to read the Tribute Book but stopped because it was full of stories about people's relatives who were once in hospital and now peacefully at rest. We sat in front of the altar, in front of the wooden cross, in front of the window, which is a picture of the sky and the tops of city cranes. I tell you this because I doubt you ever went inside. We prayed. Praying is easy when your father is close to death. When blood started coming out of his nose, I wheeled him back to the ward. You, before I knew it was you, put up a bag of platelets and stood with your hand on my shoulder while the honey-coloured cells clotted my father's blood.

Closer my God to Thee, my father said.

You wrote a word on the back of a hospital menu and tucked it in my waistband. *Ruff*, the note said.

Praise the bridge that carried you over, my father always said. Gratitude is the memory of the heart. I wonder if he was grateful for me.

My mother painted my father Medium Beige and buried him. Then she took up with his insurance broker.

Your mother always was a tart, my grandmother said. Come and live with Grandpa and me. But they'd moved to the country and I didn't want to be far away from you.

## Dirt

I go back to my spot under the brugmansia. The tree won't shade me for a while. I've stopped wondering why the sun beats down but I don't get hot or burnt.

The digging is harder going now I'm up to my chest in hole. Every morning I find things have been dropped to the bottom of it. A fork, crumbs, paper.

You told me once: the simple pleasures are below the deeper hurt. Hurt deeper. Dirt heaper. I am the Heaper of Dirt. First the topsoil, crumbling and heavy. Now a sandy fudge, half air, like biscuit crumbs. Below the frayed edges of the grass, the sides of my hole stay packed and straight. Where am I going? That's a good question for someone stuck. I oar through the dirt. Through fibres, through the earth's ruined pores to where the story of everyone's child with a plastic spade asks the question: How deep can I dig? And lower than that, the story of: Out of the injured clay came man. Then, a woman out of the curve of his rib. Being inside the earth is changing the way I write to you. Maybe I'm getting poetical, like Ilya. He told us he had his writing published in newspapers when he was a boy at the gymnasium school. Or perhaps my writing is an effect of the dreamwoman's voice. Try and speak, she says. Maybe this is my real voice.

Ilya and Miriam stop on their way up from the barn. Their green and purple Crocs at the edge of the hole.

Where am I going? says Miriam.

Morning tea time, says Ilya.

It's not bad luck for them to watch me worshipping the earth. I wonder what it looks like from up there. Sudden gusts of dust appearing in the sky.

## Bush

Hunapo is in the bush behind Furry Moyra. I hide in the ferns and watch her with the knife, asking the little tree before she removes its leaves. Above her, orange fruit the shape of olives. Then she hugs the trunk, presses her nose on its bark and sings to it. My skin stands up because her voice is beautiful and sad and another girl I knew for only one night sang like this. I jump casually out of the shade.

I knew a girl whose grandfather used to talk to the trees, I say. Go into the forest, greet the trees. Inhale them, that's what he told her. So you can find your way to them and know them even if your eyes are blinded.

Karaka, she says. Put your nose on it.

It smells of tree.

Close your eyes, man.

It stinks. Like rotten soap.

It's the right wood but I'll never manage to cut it down.

What are you going to do with it?

Hollow it out.

It's too skinny for a coffin isn't it?

Big enough for a bone box.

What's that?

A box for bones, dummy.

We hear Miriam coming through the trees.

Hello, hello. I can't see any sign of deer, can you? No browsing?

I don't think there's deer in this bush, I say. Someone told me there are deer are on those hills across the road.

Random, says Hunapo.

Well, that's good to know. Thank you, young man. What time is it?

Eight thirty.

It's about eleven, Hunapo says.

That's a bit late, says Miriam. I'll go another day. There's a way to cure a deerskin. With salt.

Then Miriam's careering back through the trees towards the house.

If you don't want to talk to Harvey, I say to Hunapo, I can ask him and I guarantee you'll get that tree.

The next day we go down to the barn and there's a karaka log lying on the concrete.

## Share

The coffin-making does turn out to be some kind of breakthrough. Because, working alongside each other in the construction of final resting places, we, who have come closest to death, talk about life. People tell the stories Harvey had hoped for. The stories we don't share in the Rainy Day Recreation Room when we sit in a chair-circle and Harvey says: Think of a story in your past where things didn't go as you hoped. When I say: Why are we doing this again? And Harvey says: People tell each other stories.

Why?

To arrive at understanding.

Of what?

Of the world and ourselves.

I might not want to be part of your narrative project.

Well, I think if you do, you might see your traumatic moments as merely turning points.

I would like to say, the trouble is, speaking in Group *is* a traumatic moment. Under the stress of being eye-balled, people sometimes forget to say: When you ask me about that, I feel upset. Instead of: *Piss off, dickwad*. Not that anyone actually says that. We are too polite.

In the barn we share. And it turns out, as long as people have the distraction of craft, i.e. not looking at each other, they talk. The urge to share is so strong that even those of us who are bad at talking or terrible at even remembering what we had for lunch, are fabulous at sharing our pain. We're so anxious to get out of the country of our past.

Engrossed in gluing and carving, hammering and weaving and painting we tell our intimate lives to strangers.

Ilya has sawn through the length of the karaka log for Hunapo. She sits and peels the bark off the thin piece that will be the lid. Then Hunapo, least likely to speak, begins to reads to us from the foolscap pad beside her.

## **Hunapo**

Dear Blue

I miss you. Every second. I have one thing to do. Three things. The box first, and the writing down, then I'll go find our baby. This is where I'll start.

*In the beginning there was no light, only the dark of two bodies meeting.* I'd just read that on a painting for sale on a cafe wall – four hundred bucks, they must've been joking. A painting of the sky pressing on hills that looked like a naked woman. I was in the van drinking my last three dollars from a takeaway cup. The dog I'd just napped was sniffing around in the back of the van. He stunk of wet dog. I was thinking about Wade and how we used to be as tight as earth and sky before I fell for you. And I wondered if Wade, at that parallel moment in prison time, was having a smoke or signing his papers or thinking about how things were going to be from now on between us all. Christ knows I didn't want to be there but I had a responsibility. You said Wade could stay with us till he got on his feet. I turned on the wipers and looked at the car parks and the prison wall through the rain and hated the city a little more but I could still wait to be home. To what was coming.

Wade told me to look after you. Ordered me the first time I visited him, before the prison overcrowded and they shipped him down the line. Look after my little bro, Blue-boy, he said. So I did. Then you started looking after me.

He'd rung me nearly every week for those four years down south. Towards the end, those phone calls were more silence than speaking. I knew why they were called long distance. They pulled you apart. I could hear Wade and me fading. I told him about

his kid brother and how we'd hooked up. I get it, he said. How could I not. I bet you were gagging for it.

But he forgave us. He was okay about us driving down for a visit at Christmas. We were his family, anyway.

That morning Wade was getting out, I jumped out of the van and went to meet him by the prison gate. I put my head to the side of his so we only hugged, not kissed. He threw his bag over the seat into the back. The dog barked and he said, What the hell is that?

Dog, I said. I told you it was my business now.

We hardly talked the whole three hours home, Wade silent and smoking, his hand stretched out beside my leg, not touching me though. The dog getting a smack for chewing the headrest. My head aching while I thought about how I'd tell him. Working up to what I should've told him fourteen months ago.

Let me, I said to you. But I hadn't. Hadn't got up the guts to say it out loud down the phone line. Jesus, even long distance seemed too close to crack someone's heart. But then, I wasn't really sure if Wade had got a heart to break anymore.

We did start having a conversation at the end of the motorway but it was just time-of-day stuff.

It'll be damn obvious, I thought. We'll walk in and they'll be sitting at the kitchen table, Tamati on Blue's knee eating a sandwich. And I thought about how the light would rush in through the gap you and me had made and possibly blind us all.

I was shaking like a leaf when I drove up the paddock to the cottage. I was thinking about how I still miss Koro's house even knowing I couldn't live there any more after Bone was killed and Wade got locked up. I could feel Koro's disappointment in the walls. I told you Wade dug his grave. That was a story we told everyone for a while. How your brother and me met. Wade in his white coat falling in love with me while I'm crying my eyes out by my koro's grave. Glamorous. I was thinking how Koro would've liked you and how I should go visit him soon. Take him one of those windmill flowers from his great-grandson. Stick it next to his headstone.

Thanks for the lift, Wade said, as if I was a taxi driver, and he followed me round to the side door. I put the dog in the washhouse and waited for the world to blow up. But

you were by yourself, cleaning up the kitchen. Wade just walked up to you and grabbed your wrist like a handshake and said Bro with his chin lifting staunch and I knew Wade already had it sussed. He knew exactly. And when he said, Been a long time, eh, what ya been up to? you said, Not much, eh bro, even though a lot of life and death had been distributed. And I said, We've been up to one thing and we didn't know how to tell you. And Wade said, It's a kid. I know. I heard. And no one's ever been so grateful for prison gossip. I thanked God, too, for brotherly love and the earth sighed a little and the cramp went out of my thighs because I'd been holding up a lot of heaviness. Two years is a long time to stress.

I went and got Tamati on my hip and showed him to Wade and Wade said Yep, sweet. But did you notice his cheek twitching like mad and how quick he picked up his bag when you said you'd show him the sleep-out? I'd spent half my dole on new sheets but I doubt he noticed.

You had that concreting job starting the next day and soon we'd be in the money so you went to get fish and chips. You weren't sure if it was okay to leave me and Tamati alone with him but I said it'd be sweet. I sat on the couch next to Wade and said I'm sorry, and Wade said I'm not 'cause I know I'll win you back. I said, You know I love you but not like that anymore. And he said, Do you have a pick axe? And I said, Jesus, Wade, you're not gonna whack Blue are you? and he said, No, woman, I wanna dig.

Then he went up the hill with your spade into the scrub. I watched from the Tamati's room and saw the gorse and manuka parting and closing all the way to the ridge. When I pointed out to you where he was, you said, I know what he's up to.

I knew what he was up to, too. He told me he'd grown dope before, when he was in the gang and you were still at school. It was a big operation - hundreds of plants hidden in a maize crop. Did you know about that? Wade had been guarding the dope when it was time for harvesting. He heard the cops coming, heaps of them, and he took off on his bike in the other direction. He found out later the cops sprayed every plant with weedkiller. Bright blue weedkiller. All over those golden, oil-dripping heads. Good job. He told me he had a year on the run and then came to the city. Started digging graves. Got you a job at Oak Sea. Blue, I wish I'd met you first.



Remember when Wade came back down the hill just before dark, sweating and sunburnt and flopped on the sofa, he said, Man that felt good to be out in the open. I want you to take me to my mate's missus. She's saving some plants in her garage for me.

And we looked at each other and you and me both thought, nah, he's going to have to leave.

Blue. I miss you. I'm a bit bashed up. I want to get what happened straight in my head. Make it right for Tamati.

That's all I got now. Hunapo puts down her letter and starts scraping the peeled bark together into a pile.

And did you make him leave? Harvey says quietly to her. He's sneaked into the barn without us noticing. Because that sounds like you and Blue were dealing with that problem really well.

That was actually the good bit of my story that doesn't need changing, Hunapo says. I haven't got to the bad bit yet.

## Choke

You have something in common with Hunapo. The tempting of dogs. But you remind me of Wade. You both have that ego I wish I had. That self-confidence. It's attractive to a person who's a follower. For the six months you let me carry on working, I asked for jobs on 62. I lingered with paperwork to see you putting up bags of blood, bantering with people hanging on to their last frame of life and making them laugh. How beautiful you could be. How secret (we were). You and I had two people inside us. My choke collar pressed on my windpipe so I had to relinquish the panic of constantly being breathless. I was always sweltering, that skivvy under my uniform, the neck rolled high.

Something with a high collar if you have it. I heard my mother say that often enough to relatives of boys who'd been found in bedrooms and garages, chairs kicked from under them.

I leaned down to take the brake off a patient's bed and you bent, pretending to help me, and whispered, I own you. The patient had tubes coming out of her nose, out of her bladder, out of her chest and she waved her arm with another tube attached and whispered to me, He's Nurse-We-Love.

## Voices

I'm going to wash you. Just rub the flannel over you. There, that feels good doesn't it? Do we believe him, Arlitz? Imagine it's true and that Harvey hasn't plunged into madness. Shall we humour him?

*All I know is the bees make it possible for me to travel between their worlds, their two realities.*

So, what you're saying is, Arlitz lives below here, awake, in a house that sleeps in the sun. How do you know this?

*I go there every night. Only it's daytime there.*

I know it's not impossible. I've heard and seen stranger things. Spirits and talking animals.

*I don't try to explain it. A scientist once told me that to explain the impossible, all you have to say is, I have discovered Factor X.*

Have you discovered Factor X, Harvey?

*I have. I can explain anything. To exist in Te Whare Moera, it seems one must also be alive above it. Perhaps dreams are important. Perhaps he is living his subconscious life.*

But he's real in that house? You can see him.

*Yes.*

How do you get there?

*Through a cave.*

## Wood

There are sickles of earth under my nails. I keep them like prizes. I remember the lines on my father's fingernails that showed the exact date of his chemotherapy.

After Shower-time I sit in the lounge and put sticking plasters on torn blisters. No good, says Ilya and he drops his pen and I hear him boiling the kettle and searching the kitchen drawers. He comes at me with scissors and cuts off the lifted skin and makes me sit with my hands in a bowl of black tea. Then he massages my palms with lanolin ointment. Let the air heal, Ilya says.

I smell like a sheep but by the next morning I can hold the spade again. And the pick. A vicious-looking implement that brings to mind chain gangs and murders. I'm always surprised Harvey lets me have sharp implements, with my history. I hit another root that turns out to be a black rubbish sack so I chop around it, excavate through soil and plastic and pull and rip until the contents are exhumed.

Wood and metal. Some sort of hand-built scooter, the handlebar twisted around the brake cables and the wheels gone. Wingnuts holding layers of wooden squares together.

What have you found? says Harvey, blocking out my sun.

Looks like some poor kid's construction project. Broken up.

Want me to take it off your hands?

Knock yourself out. I pass it up to him and it's weird because he doesn't even look at it. Just grabs the broken handle and lifts it as if he knows exactly how much it weighs.

You can show the others if you want.

Have you thought any more about your coffin?

Woodwork and I don't exactly get along, Harv, I say. I did make a bowl once at Intermediate. Sanded and sanded it. After three weeks, the teacher said, That's enough sanding. Everyone had already taken their bowls home to their mothers and started on their one-legged herons but I just kept on sanding. One month the bowl was a saucer, the next a disc, then a coin. Then crumbs. I held up the shape of the bowl in my hands, perfect in its invisibility, and said, Finished, sir. My punishment for wasting wood and sandpaper

was standing for a whole lesson with my wrist in a vice. I'm suffering for my art, I thought. I didn't mind it.

Ilya can help you. He's good with a hammer.

Harvey, you do know I plan to be wrapped in a duvet and burned on a pyre?

But I take a break and go down to the barn.

Have you come to read? Miriam says. Her cane coffin is taking shape. She is lying on the base.

Read what?

Your letter.

Your casket looks a good fit, I say.

It's very uncomfortable.

But you won't be worrying about comfort. You'll be dead.

I want my old bones to rest easy.

I'm going to make a mattress, says Ilya. He is drawing on the side of his coffin with a pencil.

Deerskin, says Miriam. That's what I need. I remember.

I think there're rules about leakage and seepage, I say. You'll have to have some sort of plastic bag.

Gross, says Hunapo.

Everyone looks at her. How did you nearly die and how are you still living? are the questions we want to ask each other.

Why don't you tell us your story, Ilya, I say.

Ilya has split an edge sawing his coffin lid and is waiting for the glue to dry.

You want me to tell you the one about a hero travelling along tormenting roads to avenge evil and find love? he says.

Our stories aren't about heroes.

Harvey wouldn't want you to say that, says Miriam.

(My idea is, I've just thought of this, that stories are about the emptiness that humans have and their attempts to fill it. They're stories are about digging one hole to fill another. They signify the pointlessness of life. Now I've thought that, I hope it's not true.)

I'll read you this letter, Ilya says. My biography. He takes papers from his sketchbook, a thick pile of blue airmail sheets and spreads them on top of the pommel.

Is this something in your past that didn't go as you hoped? I say, mimicking Harvey. Who are you writing to? Is it in English?

Shut up Arlitz. I've spoken here for ten years. I think in this language. Okay?

Everything in my past didn't go as I hoped, Miriam says.

I apologise.

It's not all your fault, Arlitz, says Miriam.

Ilya coughs and shuffles. This letter is to my son. My second son. He stands with one hand holding down the papers. None of us look at him. This is the deal. People dabble away at their coffins. I lean on the workbench and pretend to be drawing a plan for mine. Ilya's voice floats over us.

## Ilya

Dear Son.

How fed up I was instructing boys how to flip backwards and so on. One day, on the way home from the gymnasium I stopped at an establishment named *The Brew Barn*. The proprietor instructed me how to construct a still from a pressure cooker. Which I did. I walked across my lawn on my hands to celebrate this accomplishment and also to retain this skill. At sixty-six years old this was no longer a piece of cake. Perhaps she saw me, my neighbour. Even you, my galaboy, can understand why an old man would walk inverted for that girl.

From my shed I looked down the garden to the windows of her house. One upstairs window of the house was recently replaced with cardboard. I have recollection here to think of blindness like a metaphor. For God knows what. Blindness, in my humble opinion, is sometimes more than the failure of the actual eye. It is also a wanting not to see or to see things which are even not existing. Ilya, I tell myself, keep your eyes open. Even a blind pig finds an acorn once in a while. But what do I know about metaphors? Similes I like better. The girl with the plaster cast on her left arm and who lived in the blinded house was like music for my eyes.

One week after her grandfather passed, the girl let the man stay, which, in my humble opinion, was a case of myopia and bad news. She followed him out the laundry door into the garden. The man's white dog lay on the path. I discovered the breed of dog from you. A boxer, such an ugly square-headed thing. The boxer lay under the clothesline. I had an inkling to lift its badly-washed body and peg it up.

I had a good dog once. Its name was Greb. Or Grom. I didn't give him enough praise. He was the only beast that has ever looked at me with something like love. People say an animal's love for a human is misread. It is only loving its source of food. But that dog loved me. How else would it have put up with my indifference?

The man put down a long box under the pear tree. I watched his boot kicking the fallen pears like rugby balls. The girl pulled a band from her plaster wrist and tied up her black hair. She pulled a pole out of the box. I would have turned cartwheels for her. Her skin the same colour as fallen pine cones.

I leaned over the workbench and rearranged the net curtains a little and opened the shed window because I had been cleaning the fermenting bucket with bleach. A death from Janola I should avoid. Who would have found me if I blacked out from fumes and hit my head? Sometimes I wondered these things. Not you, for sure. You barely saw me. That week you stayed with me only because of circumstances beyond your control. Your mother? In four years we hadn't talked more than two sentences. If she wanted something: an email. Who indeed would come looking for me? This is more likely the point I was asking myself. A man's heart can get very thin when he has nobody to miss him. No doubt, my employer would have phoned several times and then cursed my drunken arse. Perhaps, after several days, the smell of my fermenting body would have floated through the curtains and found the nose of the dog under the clothesline. Who would come looking? The question makes me think now of my mother. I imagine her descending to poor dead Ilya lying on the shed floor, blood dried black on his scalp. The angel stroking his face. My mother had the face of the Madonna, forgive me. Umilenie. Always I feel too sorry for myself.

*Ilya, be strong.* My mother used to weep as she wrapped tape around my hands. My palms had blisters on top of broken blisters on top of calluses and my father was waiting to lift me to the high bar.

*Where something is thin, Ilyusha, that is the place it tears.* She put her mouth against my ear. I understand now she was not talking about skin. My mother liked metaphors. Through life I have tried to thicken myself. My heart. But also my skin. I tried to teach you this hardness.

It was five days after I put the wheat to soak and it was making foam in the bucket. Tonight, I thought, when Valek is asleep, I will strain the wash into the pressure-cooker still and light the gas ring. My father always used potatoes but his vodka was inferior. I don't know why I even think of him.

*Honey, give us it.*

So, I discovered her name. Honey. The man squashed his cigarette into the path and helped Honey push the pointed pole into the hard lawn. He was short with a shaved head and he took off his shirt to show he was in top-notch condition although, in my humble opinion, he could have tried a hundred more sit-ups a day. Honey slid a second



pole inside the first. At the top of the pole, a coil. I made one similar in the copper end of the tube joining my pressure cooker. I filled the tube with salt and wrapped it around a can of peaches to keep the shape. Five days ago, I was heating flaked wheat in a pan and I heard Honey scream. Then I saw a chair leg break through the upstairs window and glass rain down on their washing. I thought, *I see something but what business is it of mine? A curious nose is cut off*. There was shouting. I have never been a brave person. Who am I to tread on another man's business? Honey ran into the carport. The short man followed, making fists. Honey got into her car and drove away. The man whistled for his dog and I heard his van start up. I imagined the man chasing his dog over the dangerous grass and severing an artery in his foot. Then I imagined her hanging out her underwear. Her bare soles. I picked up slices of the window and left a parcel of it on their rubbish bin.

I rested my elbows on the windowsill, my head unsteady with fumes. Honey ran around the hydrangeas and the white boxer got to his paws and chased her. When its pink mouth wrapped up the ball Honey was pulled off her feet. I laughed, quietly, in case you heard me having a good time. The man yelled, *Drop it, Bone* and the boxer spat the ball into the man's hand. He wiped the ball on Honey's shirt and handed it to her. The man slapped Bone's ears and the dog lay down on the dried-up pears.

Honey looped the cord onto the top of the coil. She took a yellow paddle in her good hand and batted the tennis ball around the pole, a small circling moon, the ring travelling down the spiral. The man shouted at the boxer because it was biting the peg basket into bits and pieces.

I could see through my binoculars Honey's t-shirt lift as she rewound the cord. The man shrugged and turned towards the pear tree and I observed a dogface tattoo was attacking his right shoulder blade. He picked up a pear and threw it towards my house. Then I saw it was not a pear but a piece of glass. It disappeared inside the brown hydrangeas. The man lit a cigarette.

The dog ran after the ball on its leash, Honey's laughter like *kolakolcheeky*. Little bells. I could have dreamed the man's tattoo would come to life in the night and chew him up.

You were in the house. You had not left the television screen. You suffered staying with me because Nina was at a nursing conference in the South Island. Your mother had no alternative. You required supervision. You understand, I never put a rough hand on you, never showed you any violence. God only knows I wanted to shake you like a ragged doll sometimes when you couldn't complete a manoeuvre no matter how many times I demonstrated the technique. But. I only had to watch my wife across the gym, slapping a poor girl until tears soaked her leotard. Perhaps this isn't true. Is it my father I recall, the birch rod he used when I couldn't climb the rope hand over hand to the top of the barn? He never touched me, of course. For my failures, he would beat my mother.

'Ilya, *durak*. You see what you have done to her? Aren't you ashamed?'

My mother had perfected the art of lying motionless. When my father put down his stick and took off his steamed glasses to wipe them on my shirt, she would wink at me from the floor.

I wanted to be Ilya the Shameless Gymnast. I wanted to climb with my mother on my back hand over hand up the climbing rope to the top of the barn and sit her safe in the rafters.

Gymnastics is all I want to recall. It is all I know. I trained the Kiwi boys to the end of my tether. It was a lost cause. In our adoptive country, boys have no discipline, no stamina. At sixteen they choose girlfriends and drift away from training. Disappointment leaps from generation to generation.

I fried some *blinchiki* and rolled up them up with lamb and put on sour cream the way you like it.

*Have some blinchiki*, I said and you curled your lip and looked at me sideways as if you thought I was going to poison you. You were nearly nineteen years old with a chip off the old block on your shoulder, so what could I do, you could decide when to eat. You squinted through your glasses at the screen and fired a Kalashnikov at a woman. She turned to blood. Such a game for a blue boy. *Galaboy*. But for one drink, one moonshine glass, you could have been staying on your own.

In my dream, Honey wore a blue leotard trimmed with gold bells. Her hips rotated as she vaulted to the top of the gym and landed in the pear tree.

Your mother discovered me once in the mat room with my arms around the new Rhythmic coach. Yulia was wiping her eyes with my handkerchief, homesick for Kiev. One consoling kiss, a hand on her back and Nina was packing the woman's ribbons and clubs.

*Stop dreaming. Five feet six with not even muscles anymore to compensate for those looks.*

Nina is a cruel woman, I shouldn't say, with a face like a bag of chisels. I am entitled to dream of love. We all need small pleasures.

I remember when I was twenty and in love, not with Nina.

I came home from the World Championships empty-handed with two broken kneecaps. Love and gymnastics is not a winning combination. My father could not comprehend such failure. Fourteen years of his life consumed and his son returns with not one medal round his neck. My father's bitterness left my mother with ruptured vessels in her brain, his fist laying waste to her left eardrum, jaw and facial nerve. What need did she have to smile, anyway?

I have a single photo of my parents, your grandparents, beside a river, before I existed. My mother is holding down her straw hat, her cheek muscles lifting her mouth into a sickle moon, black hair blowing loose over her face. My father's arm is around her. You can imagine his fingers pressed hard into her waist but there is a hole in the photo where I have cut off my father's hand. It has taken me all my will not to cut out his head. Even bad memories have their place.

The pear tree put its shadow over the lawns. I turned on the gas cylinder and the cooling water to the condenser. The wash boiled. I checked temperatures. Methanol vaporizes at the head of the brew and so I tapped the condensate into a pickle jar and drew a skull and crossbones over the label. It was a good habit to have. Then I brought up the temperature and waited for the ethanol to run through the cooler tubes and into the collecting pot. The spirit smelled like wet cardboard. I added milk and egg white. Then I

boiled off the liquid again. And one more time. Three distillations for purity. The alcometer said, *Ilya, you have conjured a spirit good as gold*. I filtered the gold through carbon, added water and siphoned it into clean bottles.

You were not yet born, Valek, when we immigrated to coaching jobs in Auckland. You fell into training as I had, an infant seeking time with a father who gave his time to other boys. At four years old, you would run across the stadium dragging a car tyre strapped to your waist. You'd fight back tears as I sat on your back and folded you in half or straightened your leg behind your head. I taped your small hands, blistered raw from the bars, until your palms became tough with calluses. Nina and I pushed you, but you pushed yourself further.

Years living in a gymnasium with Sundays off for homework and video games. Thirty hours a week - conditioning before school, apparatus after. At fifteen, you had the fine-boned face of a boy and shoulders as broad as a man's.

We heard the whispers. *What about his social life? They are stunting him. He'll be psychologically damaged*. In our adopted country, people do not understand the privilege of selection. At your age I was an elite athlete, the hopes of my mother country on my shoulders.

You had only your parents' hopes on your shoulders. In the Nationals you gained three gold medals and two silver. These against full grown men. Unplaced in vault, but it was always your weakest apparatus. I shook your hand and said, *These are just flowers, Valek. Berries will follow*. We hung the medals from the car mirror and listened to them ring against the dashboard all the way home to your mother.

She said nothing as I took you away from her hugging.

*It's okay*, I said. *A little celebration. What harm?* I unbolted my shed and we toasted your success with your first vodka. *Health and strength*. The copper still beamed with us in the lamp light.

I asked you. *Valek, is this what you want?*

*Papa*, you smiled, vodka warming your tongue. *I have only one friend, what else would I do?*

I remember weighing my newborn son, praying for flexibility, strength and small bones. I knew I would mould you, Valek, into someone extraordinary. I came so close.

Honey bloomed out of the washing.

*You are Honey?*

*Yep.*

*I am Ilya originally from Siberia. I can give you a hit.*

*What?* She stepped back.

*The pole tennis.*

*Oh, yeah. Thanks. I'll get the bats.*

*Your husband is at work?*

*Nah, he's not my husband. He's cleaning windcreens at the traffic lights. It's good money.*

I knew this wasn't true. I was not oblivious to the many dregs of society coming to her back door every day and leaving with tinfoil packets.

I stepped between the hydrangeas. She handed me a bat and I hit the ball in semicircles to her.

*I met your boy last night. Val, is it? I borrowed some milk off yours, hope that's cool. He's a nice guy. He lent me a CD, too.*

She liked you. I returned each swing with a sturdy stroke. It took no time for me to win the game. *Best of three?* I said.

But.

*My arm's a bit heavy today. Thanks anyway.* She sat down on the lawn, her skirt so short I tried not to look in her direction. She bent her knees so that, by mistake, I hit the ball very hard and the cord tangled around the pole. I took my time to unwind it, said goodbye and walked back to my shed. I decided against a cartwheel on the way.

When you didn't make the Commonwealth Games team, I said nothing much until we arrived home from the trials. Then I heard history coming out of my mouth.

*Zalupa! So many errors. You are lazy. You get pears from the pear tree by hitting it with your dick!*

I wish I could take back the things I called you, my son. You kicked a hole in the bathroom door. You said you would never go back to the gym.

The next day, my young gymnasts were in no mood for my temper. I left early, the little peasants somersaulting into the foam pit. I went into our bedroom and found you walking in your mother's best shoes.

Such a simple act, sliding a foot into a shoe. *I am going out*, it says. *I have shoes, I am walking*. A boy may try on his father's shoes. Even if they are not great shoes to fill, it is not such a terrible step. A son walking in his mother's shoes. Well, a completely different highway. *I am going out*, it says, *to stab these heels into my father's heart*.

You hung your head but I had already seen. The pink cheekbones. The red on your lips. I hate to admit but if your mother had worn makeup, she could not look one quarter as beautiful.

*Papa. Please, don't.*

I threw my handkerchief at your face and you caught it with one swift hand. I turned my back on you and slammed the door and ran around the streets until my shins ached.

When it got dark, I came home. Your mother was holding a bowl under your mouth.

*Why couldn't you keep your filthy business to yourself?* she screamed. *Fifteen years old and sick drunk. Look at him. My poor baby.*

I washed out the shot glass. *It's only a thimble. He'll survive*. How many times have I wiped away the past with a drink? The next day I would forgive you and feed you beef stew with a little vodka in it for your hangover.

You slept for an hour, then woke and cried, *Papa. I can't see*.

*What did you do?* I asked, already knowing. I ran to my shed. The bottle stood on my workbench. The first and last of the brew is undrinkable. Every batch, I take off the heads and tails and store it in a bottle with *Methanol* written clearly on it. I saw my face, distorted in the metal onion. A hundred millilitres of methanol will kill a man. I drove my blinded son and my screaming wife to the emergency ward.

The doctors explained how methanol converted to formic acid inside you. They dripped ethanol into your veins to counteract the poison. They washed and recycled your

blood. They drained your lungs. For twenty one days they injected you. The days we thought we would lose you, I whispered my promise, *The dressing up is our secret, Valek. Shame isn't worth dying for.*

You came back to us with one eye sightless and the other inferior.

The afternoon she was committed to the state institution, I dressed my mother in her best clothes. She wouldn't put on her coat or boots even though it was snowing. Two nurses lifted her by her armpits. I remember my mother's white limbs poking from a green dress, her bare feet pedalling yet gaining no ground.

My father sat at the table and poured two *charkas* of potato vodka.

*I'm not going to live here anymore,* I said.

*To us!* My father drank holding his breath, then exhaled through a piece of rye bread he held under his nostrils. He thumped his tumbler on the table. *The end is the crown of any work, Ilya. Drink! Health and strength.*

That night, he pulled himself hand over hand to a barn rafter, tied my climbing rope around his neck and hanged his remorse.

I woke in the night, choking, Honey's voice unmistakable, somersaulting through the layers of dark. A sound that hit me in the breastbone so that I forgot for several seconds to breathe. Only once before have I heard such a sound. The day I fell ten metres from a rope and snapped my tibias. A medic reduced the fractures there on the mat. I'd climbed to a cobweb on the gym ceiling for a girl. She'd begged me to free a trapped sparrow flapping inside it. I pulled the bird through the torn hole. The spit of spiders on my knuckles. The skin and sweat of old gymnasts. The sparrow's body and claws and one wing were wrapped in threads. I held the small beating thing. For a moment, my heart and the bird's moved together, both quick from their struggles. The bird's a hum through its feathers, through its cobweb coat. There is something, Valechka, about cupping in your hand a living wild animal that isn't anything like you at all. A heart high up, trilling and warm. And absolutely like you. I tucked the bird into my singlet and hung on the cleat and watched, far below, a boy, a white windmill on the high bar with my father's arms navigating, driving him, and I thought, *I could fly away from this place.*

But. I began to descend the rope. Then the bird, a miracle, pushed up and freed itself from my singlet. Its unbound wing opened and caught my face and I thought, *But you won't fly*. A practical boy's simple thought. I reached out to stop it because I knew this was true. I had shot game birds in the wing and watched them with no cushion of air beneath them, no press, no symmetry. A simple boy's practical thought. You won't fly.

And then, the following truth I grasped instantly: *Goodbye rope*.

I fell. I wished for even half a wing. The bird fell too, just above me. I heard my name. Would it be the last time? We had nothing to press against. I remember the falling. Slow. There was the sound of people on the mats below gasping for air. The red girders climbing away into roof. I wondered if I would land on my head or my spine.

The sparrow didn't die right away. It would live a few beats longer. Ilya? He would live, as you know, many years. A little arthritis. But.

My feet. Those are what I landed on. For a gymnast this is a challenge. A perfect dismount. Another time and I would have scored points. I fell back onto the mat.

*Move your legs*, said my father.

*Bird*, I said and lifted my feet.

The pain was coming. Pain was a good thing. The feeling of nerves existing.

A fellow found the sparrow and brought it to me. My father took it and held it in front of my face. He shook the dumb thing. *This is worth your life?* The words were behind my father's teeth.

*I have my life*, I thought. But I knew what my father meant.

*Wasted*. My father growled and snapped the sparrow's neck and threw its body over his shoulder. Enough bone breaking for one day.

I woke again, in the city hospital, my legs in traction.

I remember now, Valek, it was a female. Common and plain and dust-brown. Uncommonly beautiful.

I opened my bedroom curtains and saw house lights going on in the valley. A woman sobbed and coughed and the man's cursing was not muffled behind the cardboard window. My heart tightened. After a while there was so much silence that people turned off their lights. Perhaps we thought we had only been dreaming. I thought of a trap tied to a tree in the tundra, a sable writhing in it.



I went downstairs and looked at you, my son. Asleep on the couch with your headphones crackling. Your sleeping bag smelled a little of hemp. You had grown. I unhooked your glasses and thought for a second of my father. How I had become him, despite my efforts. How we both expected our sons to compensate for our own failures.

*It is lucky you don't like girls, I whispered. No sons to ruin.*

In your dreams I hoped you were escaping. Riding on a pommel, kicking it to a gallop, then leaping through the stadium doorway into the sunlight. *Zolotka*. Golden one. Most of all, I hoped Honey would wake tomorrow and walk into her garden.

I watched her through my binoculars. She was pulling clothes from her washing machine. A bruise striped down her brow, swelling up her eyelid and her cheekbone. The man was winding up the pole tennis as if everything was hunky and dory, lacing the cord through the coil and tying it in knots. Knotting and knotting until the ball had no swing. He pulled the pole out of the hole and dropped it on the lawn.

When visiting, it is customary to take a small gift. I poured spirits into a miniature bottle and stepped through the hydrangeas.

*Hello, neighbour, I said. I make vodka in my shed. For you, please.*

*Thanks mate. The man laughed. Home brew, eh? Bet it's bloody potent.*

*Yes, knock off your socks.*

Not immediately but perhaps within a few hours of drinking, the man with the dog tattoo would start vomiting and writhing with the pain in his stomach. His vision would blur. This you know. At the hospital they would feed him charcoal and stick needles into his arms. He would recover but he would no longer have the strength to hit her. Within a week, his symptoms would recur and his lungs, heart and optic nerves would sustain damage. If the doctors did not suspect methanol ingestion - and how would they? - the man would become unconscious and die. I would give his grieving girlfriend my handkerchief and would be available for consolation.

Nina held my handkerchief by a corner. It was smeared with lipstick.

*Why did you let him find out? I suppose she's half your age? I don't want to know.  
I hope she is worth your son's eyes.*

Pig, she called me. Dog. You understand, this is how I let my wife think that you, my good son, seeking to swallow the pain of discovering his father's lover, had mistakenly poured vodka from the wrong bottle.

After your mother took you away, I found the onion still on the floor. She had wrenched off the copper coil and temperature gauges and crushed them. Broken glass was everywhere, vodka draining through the floorboards, over my sketchbook and poems.

Hell had no fury like the stupid woman I loved. I was lucky she didn't think of striking a match. The tears of my reflected face fell upside-down over the onion bulb.

*Why did you keep the methanol?* the police asked me.

*I grew up in queues,* I said. *I never throw away anything. It's good for cleaning.*

The police loaded the broken still into a van. *Do not go anywhere, Mr Svoboda.*

The police knew it is not illegal to brew spirits in this country. It is not illegal to keep cleaning fluid for your *gomik* son to drink.

From my shed window I looked down the slope to the house in front. I heard the man's van start up. I saw you moving across the lawn with two hands full of CDs, your head turned in that way so your working eye was in front. You disappeared around the side of Honey's house. I followed your footsteps past the hydrangeas and picked up the pole tennis and replanted it in its hole. I threaded the ball through a loosened knot. The man wouldn't spoil her game. Untying the cord was like solving a puzzle but I'm a patient man. Eventually, the ball was free.

I did not hear the boxer coming. It launched from its hind legs and bowled me to the ground. It wrapped up my shoulder blade in its pink mouth. I poked my finger into the jelly of its eye. It opened its mouth to yelp and I tried to run but it tackled me as I tripped over pears. I fell and felt its teeth puncturing my face. A boy called for his dead mother and her voice told him to be still; the dog will lose interest in lifeless prey. I was lifeless. The voice, it seems, was not an expert on self-defense. The dog ripped out hair, the gristle of my ear. Skin peeled from my cheek. I must have yelled. A paw as heavy as

a rock stood on my ribs. My arm. Jaws closed on my neck. More teeth. The dog began to shake its head, my brain a ball in my skull.

The world was as clear as sediment. A door opened and you, in slow motion, stepped out. You took forever to reach me, Valek. You picked up the pole tennis like a javelin and your slow muscles drove the point through the white dog's side. The tennis ball whipped through the sky. The boxer released my neck and fell, whining, onto the lawn, skewered like *shashlyk*. Every dog has its day.

A bruised angel danced around us, haloed with pear branches.

*What the hell are you doing? What have you done to Bone? Oh fuck. Wade is gonna, oh my god, look at his face.*

I wanted her to stop the shouting.

*Shut. Up. Honey. Get an ambulance. Get towels.* You pressed your fingers on my throat. Such a good son.

I watched Honey pull the pole from the dog. A noise came out of the animal's guts and throat. She screamed as it tried to stand, staggered and clumped down beside me. Its dogskin stink mixed in my mouth with the taste of blood. I heard Bone and me breathing fast together. The dog crying, dying on the grass beside me. I thought, *I might be biting the dirt also.*

*Jesus, Papa. Keep breathing.*

For you, I coughed. Tasted blood. I told you about the miniature bottle but the words fermented between your fingers and foamed out of my neck.

The pear tree leaves fluttered above us, a yellow ball jiggled on a cord. There are no endings. Everything circles. I felt like a child, my father waiting below me as I turned from a copper coil, a rope around my windpipe. I was holding a pear in each blistered hand.

Ilya folds up his letter and drops it into his coffin.

Jesus, Ilya, I say. That's a terrible story.

The Siberian spits on his hands and goes over to the parallel bars and pulls himself up. Locks his arms and just sits there, his legs out straight in space.

I listen to the scrape of Hunapo's chisel and the creak of cane and the silence of the women. I knew the man with the dog tattoo on his shoulder blade. Is he dead now? Poisoned with Ilya's spirits? I want that to be true. Why isn't Hunapo speaking? Isn't she Honey? My Honey? Ilya's angel with the broken arm?

Why am I not speaking? I had one true friend and he was Ilya's son.

## **Valek**

Poor Valek. Valek was given to me when I was twelve, out of the teacher's sympathy. He was eleven but looked eight. He told me later he'd changed schools because he wouldn't speak English and had been bullied. I heard his mother talking to the teacher and her accent was like a light bulb going on in the back of my brain. For some reason the first thing Valek did was lift up his shirt and show me his stomach. It was an egg box, his muscles this fascinating, a deviation. I wanted to touch them but I knew the school rule.

Look after Valek, said the teacher.

I did, beyond the call of duty. I taught Valek to speak. This is the cloakroom, I said. These are the steps. Steps. Seat. Sit down. This is a lunch box.

Valek's mother brought his lunch, on a foil-covered plate every day, his fork wrapped in a paper napkin. The other kids stood around and watched him eat for the first two lunchtimes but then the novelty of the lunch mother and her hot stews wore off.

This is the field. This is the jungle gym. Valek taught me how to do chin-ups on the bars. Hang from my knees and do sit-ups until I begged Stop. Enough. Time out. Valek was a fast learner.

We were inseparable but we never hung out at each other's houses because of his ruthless training schedule. His father was his coach and had the Olympics in his sights.

One Saturday - we were fourteen - he called me up and said he'd given up gymnastics. I biked round to his house. We went into his room and I could see he'd been crying. Wait here, he said. I was looking at his trophies on his dresser when he came up

behind me and grabbed my crotch. I turned round and he was dressed like a girl. A woman.

You look nice, I said. I took a diamond out of my shorts' pocket.

What's this?

A present. You could get it made into an earring or something.

He kissed me. His mother's lipstick tasted like make-up for the dead.

I like girls, I said.

That's okay. Do you want a drink?

We sat on his bed and he got a thermos out of his schoolbag. It had vodka in it. Homemade. The vodka burned our throats and made us giggle. We lay down and fumbled around. I lifted up his dress and ran my fingers jealously over his abs. I told him I'd once worn dresses. Then we heard his father's car and he ran to the bathroom. I climbed out the window. Valek didn't come back to school. I went round to his house and a neighbour told me the police had been and the boy and his mother had gone. I, the chicken, was riding home while Valek was blinding himself. How can anyone say anything?

Ilya, dips and swings between the parallel bars and pushes himself into a handstand. Valek is all right, he says. I will get out of here and find my son and make my peace with him and his mother. He lifts one arm and lets himself tip sideways, his feet falling in a wide arc to the mat.

## Voice

Your eyes follow me more and more. I'm going to take off your sheet. Now the cage over your feet. You're trying to speak, aren't you. What do you want to say? Let's do your exercises. No complaining. I wish you would. Circles with your feet first. You're trying so hard to speak, I can see. One word and a story is yours. A story about Nina running through the snow. Blink if you understand me. Come on, clever boy. Oh, did you move your toe? I think you did. Again.

## Hunt

I wake feeling cold and full, with pins and needles in my feet. Stand over the toilet and let myself drain. I go into the kitchen for a drink. Miriam, dressed in a red coat, is putting fruit into a backpack.

What's the time, Arlitz?

Six a.m. Going somewhere?

Hunting.

Oh right. Does Harvey know?

He got me these. She lifts her knee and shows me her new boots. Thick green socks. And this. She takes a rifle from behind the counter and puts the strap over her shoulder. Bye baby bunting, granny's gone a-hunting. Gone to get a deery skin to wrap the little granny in.

Where are you going to find a deer?

Over the hills and far away.

I don't think you should go by yourself. Is that loaded?

No, silly. She puts her hand in a pocket and holds out two bullets on her palm.

I think I should come.

But Miriam is out the kitchen door. I see her heading down the garden. Stooping to pet a Miss Lay.

I find a jacket in my wardrobe and some decent boots that fit perfectly. I run down to the willows and stand on the bottom fencewire and heft myself over. I'm okay, I say. My heart's pounding but I can breathe. I do not explode. I am officially an outmate. Outside the bounds of Furry Moyra and still in one piece.

The forest spills down from the hills to the edge of the tarseal. I see Miriam, in the distance, step into the trees. I run up the middle of the lane and find the sign that marks the place she vanished. *Toitu te whenua*, it reads. *Please leave the land undisturbed*. I look back and there is Hunapo running to catch up.

I didn't know if we could, you know, get out, she says.

Neither.

Where are you going?

After Miriam. To find a deer.

A deer! For real? Go on then.

We go up the track through nikau and kiekie vines, see Miriam cross a narrow creek and stamp her boots dry on the stones. The birds are waking and starting their chorus.

There's something noble about being in the bush, away from people, I say. Makes you feel rugged. Uncorrupted.

Whatever, Hunapo says. She overtakes me on the track. Miriam is working her way up a gully.

I was thinking about the day I first met you, I say to Hunapo's back. I should've protected you from him. I should have come out to your house and warned you. At least stood up to him. He was violent.

There wasn't anything you could do.

Wade didn't care about anyone.

I think he did care about me. Before the drugs messed him up.

Some men just like to hurt people. It makes them feel powerful. I'd never hurt you.

I know.

We climb without speaking for maybe twenty minutes, then I pull Hunapo behind a trunk as Miriam turns to look back at the ground she's covered.

People won't understand you hunting.

I'm surprised by Miriam's loud voice but she's having a conversation with herself. Her breath coming in short huffs.

They'll think there's something pathological about it, she says, imagine you have some sort of blood lust. I'm well aware of what people think. Even without knowing I hunt, they find me contemptible. That's why you've never stripped the pelts off deer on the verandah. I've been discreet because people will invent analogies about a woman with a knife. You're good with a knife. Short is best for field dressing a deer. A big knife will make a hash of it. I've always been a scrupulous surgeon. Almost always.

Then on Miriam goes, towards the ridge. The track is hard-climbing. Hunapo names the trees for me. Tawai where, that's red beech, kamahi, miro. The early sun heats my neck. My legs ache because they're only used to walking to the barn or to the hens or down the side of a hole. Do you think we should tell her we're stalking her? She might shoot us.

Are you mental? Nobody's gonna shoot us.

Miriam, I call, *Miriam!* but she keeps forging upwards without looking back.

When we're high up, Hunapo gives me a drink from her waterbottle. Fantails perform in the ferns around us. Through the trees there are glimpses of sea.

My grandmother took me hunting once, I say. Standing next to Hunapo, the closeness of our two bodies silent in the forest, Hunapo's neck radiant with sweat, I remember it suddenly. We came upon a herd of red deer eating lichen off the trees. My grandma stood behind me and helped me steady the rifle, showed me where to rest my cheek. When the stag was in my scope, I didn't shoot it. It was enough to know I could if I wanted to. She took the rifle from me and shot a buck. It ran few metres and died. I remember the sound of the other deer charging away in panic. I was nine and didn't cry.

Let's keep going, Hunapo says.

I follow her. Always come up on your deer from behind, my grandmother said. Take this grass and touch its eye to make sure it's dead.

It's dead. That's where the bullet went in its neck.

Help me lay the deer on its back.

Say thank you to him.



Thank you. We had to thank the deer for its life.

Put on your gloves. Now feel along the ribcage. Can you find the v-shaped bones in its chest.

Yes, I said.

That's the sternum. Hold my knife. Cut here through the hide from the sternum down to its crotch. Don't be afraid. The deer is giving us his meat so we can survive.

I'm not afraid.

Then my grandmother took the knife from me. Deepened my tentative line through the muscle wall and she rolled the innards out of the body cavity and cut the membranes to free them. Reached up into the deer and pulled the heart and lungs free. Pounded her knife through the pelvic bone. Cut the skin around its hole and took out the intestines. I saw the proper surgeon in her.

I never saw guts before, I said. My face flushing with the effort of being brave.

Now we'll roll the deer onto its belly. Keep its head uphill, and open the legs so that the blood drains out. We want it to cool down. Bag up the heart and liver. These. Good boy. Now take off your gloves and wash yourself.

She poured water over my little hands.

What do we do with the other guts?

We leave them for the hawks.

Give them a feast?

Yes. Grandpa will be waiting. Let's drag home your deer.

I bet you didn't know I could field dress a deer, did you?

Hunapo looks straight at me and says, I wish Wade was dead.

Wasn't he poisoned? I say. Didn't he drink methanol?

No. What? No.

We begin to climb again.

I could do it, I say. Not a gun though.

Poisoning would work. I could make something.

We keep Miriam at a safe distance, just the flick of her red coat in the trees ahead and Hunapo begins to talk.

## Girl

Once upon a time a girl was sitting on the floor folding washing and thinking they might be free of him when she heard a car door slam and tyres in the stones at the gate. A horn. Then he came in to the lounge. He didn't look at her and went over to the couch. His hair was starting to show out of his scalp and his face unshaved. Sunken. He was holding a plastic bag with something heavy wrapped in it. He sat down and unrolled the bag quickly and sat there looking at the gun resting on his jeans. The girl had seen rifles before but never a small gun like this one. It was old, the sort a cowboy would have, a revolver, she thought. It seemed worse than a rifle. Like it was made to kill close up. Wade said *ha!* and put his big hand around it and and turned it over and over to look at it. His legs were joggling up and down, his boots tapping on the floor like he needed to take a piss.

*Is that real?* said the girl.

He clicked it open and showed her the empty holes. Spun the cylinder and pushed it back inside the gun.

*I don't want it in here,* she said. A gun was like second sight. She could understand a gun wasn't going to stay quiet for long. The girl didn't think Wade would shoot her but then it wasn't the Wade he used to be. She looked at the window and wished she could see Blue coming quick across the paddocks to the house.

Wade looked straight at her then and the girl turned and saw his eyes were just dark ringed holes with no-one much inside and she knew he'd been bingeing for five days because that was how long he'd been away. The no-one inside him looked edgy. He took a wad of paper out of his pocket and ripped it open, his hands shaking. There were four bullets. He laid them in a line on the arm of the couch so they pointed at her.

She stood up with the folded towels and went to go along to the bedroom where Tamati was having his afternoon sleep but Tamati came suddenly through the lounge doorway. He was learning to run. That baby ran everywhere. Even when he was in that slowness of just-waking, his hair sticking up and his nappy sopping. Before she could put down the towels and grab him, he had run to Wade and Wade gave him the gun. Then he picked Tamati up and sat him on his thigh where the gun had been and said, *Hello little fucker, I'm your uncle Wade who should be your Dad.*

*Come here Tamati.* She said it matter of fact as if nothing was bothering her. She put the towels on the chair. *You want a biscuit?*

*Where's Blue?* Wade said.

*I don't know. Around. He'll be here in a minute.* Both of them knew she was lying.

*I would a called my boy Triumph. That's a good name.* He was joggling Tamati on his knee and Tamati was laughing thinking it was a game. *You shoot Blue for me, ay, little fucker? Put a couple in his head for touching your mumma.* He picked up a bullet and turned it in front of Tamati's eye. *Let me show you how we put these in.*

*Don't. Please. Tamati come get a bicky. Now.*

*You're still mine ya know, Ho-ney Re-reng-a.* Claiming her with each syllable of her name.

*Am I.*

He held up the bullet. There were dots tattooed into his knuckles. In the hollow between his thumb and finger was an H that had been scratched out and filled with ash. Healed over into a welt. When she'd first seen it, she'd thought, there might be hope for us. The H was hope and her. Today she saw the H was the hate in Wade that he'd brought from being inside. Hate for Blue and for her and for the baby having this life instead of him. Because of him. She understood it.

Tamati had his hands around the gun as if he knew how to hold it, had it round the right way, his finger on the trigger and she thought, what makes a boy know that already? Then he lifted the revolver quick with both hands and the muzzle caught Wade hard on the eyebrow. That small dull tock and her stomach went down in her feet.

*Ah fuck,* he said and the girl stepped forward to take Tamati but Wade had pulled the gun out of the baby's hands and grabbed him by the neck of his t-shirt and jumped up, sending the bullets onto the floor and when the girl went to grab Tamati, Wade whacked her sideways with the gun handle and she was on her arse watching him hurl Tamati so that her boy's little body flew, was actually airborne, the girl thought afterwards, across the room. She screamed but she couldn't remember Tamati crying out. All the times she replays it in her head for as long as she might live, she can't hear him cry out.

Do you want to stop? I say.

Nah. Keep going. She's fast, that old girl.

I mean, you don't have to tell me.

The girl remembers everything so clear. Tamati's head hitting the doorframe and the hard smack of his body hitting the wall and the small smack of his small skull cracking and the thump when he landed. These were the sounds his body made. The girl crawled to the doorway. Her stomach hurt where the gun had hit her and she yelled when she saw the gash opened up in Tamati's forehead right around to his ear. His fine hair was suddenly almost blue, shining wet and matted over his scalp. She could see the white layers of his skin inside him and she pulled out the front of her shirt and held it against his open head. She screamed at Wade. *Get an ambulance*. But Wade was picking up the bullets and the plastic bag and slowly wrapping up the gun. *Ask his fuckin Daddy*, he said.

I don't need to hear if you don't want to.

In the gloom, I feel my cells shift. The trees are more dense, a hood over us. Hunapo panting ahead of me and she does want to. She can't stop this story.

*Get out*, she yelled. And then she heard *tamati tamati tamati* and a terrible sound that women make when they are lying over their broken child and lifting him and his head is hanging, his shirt scrunched up and his tough little arms limp and his cheeks no-colour and they see their baby's skin sucked between his ribs and his chest trying to lift but his breath is going and they can't make it not gone no matter how many times they hold him tight and say his name and kiss his tiny mouth or blow their breaths into it. She tried to give him all her breaths.

I need to sit down.

*Get up*. He came and grabbed her hair and towed her to the couch and he bent over her to look at Tamati like he was interested now. So she went for him, her nails reaching to rip at those tweaking eyes but he grabbed her wrist and wrenched her hand away and all the time she was screaming, *don't touch him*, leaning her body over her baby in her lap, *he's not yours* and he said *I know that, you bitch*, and then she was lying on her back with Tamati bleeding on her chest, her foot coming up into Wade's groin, making him yell, but he was too strong for her of course, had the strength of P still in his

muscles and he got his fingers around her neck and she needed to run outside and call Blue up on the hill but she couldn't get free from Wade's dead eyes and she couldn't breathe any more and she was blacking out and gone.

Hunapo looks back at me and I wipe my eyes and hers are dark and shining and somewhere else. She reaches out her hand and I hold it and she pulls me along, when I should be the one helping her up the hill. I can hardly breathe. The trees open up and Miriam is sitting at the top of a ridge in a throne of tussock, her face to the sun. Way down below us Furry Moyra is nestled somewhere in the bush across the valley. I push Hunapo behind a shrub because Miriam's loading her rifle. She closes the bolt and picks up her pack and slides down the escarpment into another stand of forest. We skid after her.

I don't know how you...

Shh, Hunapo says. Deer.

Miriam takes a piece of vacuum hose from her pack and puts one end against her mouth. Her voice roars through the corrugations and a frightened pigeon flies past us like a small, whirring engine, so that I almost miss the deer bellowing back a challenge.

Jesus, Hunapo says.

Miriam roars again and we wait for the provoked stag to respond.

My heart is full of Hunapo and her and Blue's baby. The forest moves around me and in me, the wet fume of decaying leaves rising from my lungs. The morose heavy branches. Wade's swinging arm. The way you knelt on my chest when the urologist stitched my arteries. Miriam bellows three times more, primitive noises that come from her gut and go aching through the foliage. The deer's answer carries up the slope. Everything amplified. The animal's only a few hundred metres from us and closing, on its way up the ridge. We watch Miriam position herself at the head of a trench where the vegetation is thin.

The deer will come down that trough, Hunapo says. We'll see it.

My skin has cooled. There's no breeze to give away our scent. The birds are obscenely loud. Miriam lifts the caller and silences them.

The deer sends back an antagonised roar. Very close now. My heart hammering. Miriam puts the gun into the socket of her shoulder, her face against the wood. I can't

calm the surging in my eardrums. The animal coming, pumped with anger, its great bulk snapping branches off the trees. Miriam clicks off the safety and I know she's waiting for the colour in the low coprosma, the texture of pelt in her scope, lining up her barrel straight down the gully. I imagine her quick breath fogging the glass like mine did when I was nine. I imagine this is how a matador feels, on the cusp of fear and thrill, the bull on a trajectory for him.

I look at Hunapo, pressed to a tree trunk, her face sad and striking, her forehead scar wild. And in that moment of absorption, the beauty and fear of my own mind overcomes me. It's as if my senses are overprimed, or I've inherited a new sense altogether. I all at once imagine nothing and know everything. I know the forest. I know the patterns of rocks and bark and droplets on leaves. I know memory. Thirst and hunger. I know the wordless dialogue between me and Hunapo. I feel everything Hunapo feels. I know the stag is you and Wade, muscled and looming. I know the fantails singing like corks against glass, the stag snorting and cracking on its determined ascent. I know my heart whacking under my shirt. I understand, 'There is only *is*.' And there, at the periphery of reality, I'm suddenly blind to all but the deer's looming fury.

Hunapo puts her hand on my shoulder. I try to speak, to say I'm sorry, Honey. About Tamati. For your loss. To tell her I'll make things right. Make things just.

But the hind comes from above, breaking through the trees, and Miriam has to turn away from the concealed stag and fix the crosshairs on the female's rust-coloured neck, the gun discharging with her shock. The hind lurching sideways and dropping, its rigid legs fanning a salute as it rolls and slides along the trench. I come back into myself and Hunapo and I forget hiding and scramble after it. When we all come to a stop, Miriam touches her rifle to the dark spot where the bullet has pierced the left shoulder.

Hello, she says, to the deer or to us, I'm not sure. There's a final shrug of the hind's snout as its nostrils close. Then, the animal is solidly still, its eyes dispassionate and clear. Miriam goes around to the hind's back and slaps the coarse-haired neck.

Lean from poor feeding, she says.

Nice skin, I say.

I reckon, says Hunapo, smiling.

I run my finger down the deer's nose and as my adrenaline subsides, I feel a welling sadness.

Miriam and I begin to haul the hind's leaden body into the daylight.

By the time we reach the edge of the trees we are sodden with sweat. Miriam takes a knife from its sheath and swipes a stone over the blade to freshen it.

Thank you, she says.

Let me, I say. I open the deer the length of its belly, and we recoil slightly at its crude, ferrous smell. Then Miriam dissects out the organs and lets gravity pull them onto the stones.

Pregnant already, she says and cuts the slinky away from its sac and examines its elfin head and the long, hinged limbs before cupping it in her hands and carrying it back into the forest. Hunapo stays with the doe and I follow Miriam and help her dig a hole in the leaf litter. She drops in the small creature and I press a pile of leaves over it with my boot.

The vermin won't get it, Miriam says. Didn't I spare them all the burden of existence?

Who? I say. But she just grabs a handful of disintegrated leaves and scours the blood off her palms. Then she sits on her haunches and puts her hands on her beanie and begins to weep, inconsolably. On the slope below me, the fortunate stag roars. Where the daylight begins, I glimpse the dead hind rising to her hooves and go galloping across the trees, her belly gaping and empty.

Hunapo? I call. But she's disappeared. I help Miriam out of the trees. The two of us kneel beside the dead deer.

One day you realise you are surrounded by blood and shadows, Miriam says. She swipes at her eyes with her sleeve. Then you understand that the darkness is yourself and you must live the contradiction. There's the compassionate and decent you but with this capacity for dark thoughts and darker actions.

The sun glares down on us.

People hunt to work out what makes them alive, I say.

No. I hunt because of the contempt I have for myself.

Why do you hate yourself? I say.

We all hate ourselves. We want to pass our suffering onto something more alive than we are.

I don't think Hunapo does. She has more reason for revenge than anyone.

Look. We look up and Hunapo is there, pointing to the sky. Two hawks, already circling, coming for the deer.

Honey, I say. I will kill him for you. Honey.



## Voice

You did it. Honey. Sweet boy. I've brought you some. Here, on my finger. I'm putting it on your tongue. There. Is that good? Look at you smacking your lips. I've written it in your notes. Harvey will come tonight and I'll tell him honey. Honey! You spoke it so clearly. A little more before I turn you? I've got this potion Harvey brought. Smells bad. Maori medicine, he says. I'm going to change your dressing. Every two hours I turn you and still you get an ulcer. I'm sorry. You'll feel the tape coming off but it won't hurt. And then, Arlitz, because you've been so clever, I'll put you in your chair and we'll go out on the verandah. Sit in the sun and I'll tell you Nina's story. What do you think about that?

## **PART TWO**

### **NINA**

## Birth

In a tiny church, in a small village the size of a pinprick on a map, on the edge of a vast pine forest, on the shore of the deepest lake in the world, two sisters married two brothers. Elena and Ana were the sisters. Alexei and Ilya were the brothers.

Father Giorgio blessed them and wed them and wed them and blessed them and sent them on their way.

Seven months later, Nina and her cousin Yuri came into the world.

By two accounts together - what Nina's Babka told her and what she could picture herself - here is their birthday:

The mothers sat in the edge of the lake. Yuri and Nina bobbed in water on water. Little waves flopped over them all.

The mothers leaned their backs against the fathers' chests and held their knees like oars as if they were going to row them out of the waves and onto the gravelly shore. They puffed and shouted and heaved. The brothers' backs were bowed in the shape of resilience and love.

The lake was that shape too. The mirroring shore, a thin crescent, five hours away by motorboat. So, a lake too big to be called a lake.

People called it the Sacred Sea.

Mostly it was known as Old Man.

A crowd gathered on the lake shore. Men and women who knew Dr Alexei and wanted to observe his methods. The doctor wore sandals and speedos. Also the covering of hair on his chest and shoulders and the backs of his hands, which was as dense as the pine forest. He never had so much as a goosebump. Nina's father was about to become a famous doctor. He believed wholly in water. He believed that humans have a sacred connection to the sea.

Dr Alexei's Cold Water Treatment for sickly infants was already legend in the region. People brought their retarded children to his house. Alexei would roll up his sleeves and dunk a poor dumb kid in a water-barrel, watch until the bubbles petered out, then lift the kid into the air and twirl it around by one wrist like a bullroarer until it spluttered back to life. He had written papers.

He wrote: *Because people came from water, people belong in water and it is only the rupture of birth that forces the baby to breathe air.*

And: *If a child is kept in water as soon as it emerges from the womb it will not lose its gills or the capacity to breathe in liquid.*

*We'll see about that,* Babka said.

Babka, was an old woman who loved the Old Man but she also loved her two feet to be on solid ground. She believed wholly in earth.

Babka traded places with Dr Alexei. She didn't like it at all, but she sat down in the Sacred Sea with her black skirts slopping and held her elder daughter by her shivering blouse. The doctor knelt on the stones and felt around in the Old Man. Out came Yuri. For several long moments Alexei kept Yuri submerged between his mother's knees.

Ilya said, *Enough, Alexei. Bring it up.*

*Trust me,* said Alexei.

Yuri settled on the gravel.

Babka said, *Enough, Alexei.*

Alexei brought him to the surface and handed him to Aunt Ana. The crowd was silent.

*It's a boy,* said Ilya. The crowd waited for the cry. Yuri lay still, not even driven by the smell of his mother to open his mouth. *Did you drown him?* shouted Ilya. The joy and the agony together. First a son, then a dead son.

Yuri's cord was tied with string and cut with a pelting knife. Then Dr Alexei threw blue Yuri into the sky and caught him. Yuri gave a yelp and a bleat. The crowd on the shore breathed out together and clapped and clapped.

*You see,* said Alexei, *he is a little fish and he will not lose his gills. Look at the vigour the water has given him.* He held Yuri by his ankles. A man took photographs.

Those photographs were the beginning of Dr Alexei's worldwide fame.

*That boy cried and coughed up mucus and lungwater for three days after that,* Babka told Nina. *Where was the photographer to record the miracle of his mother mopping up that?*

She came later in the day, Nina. Babka had made Alexei carry his hypothermic wife back over the narrow shore, across the road and through the pines. Nina was born eight minutes before midnight on Babka's bed. Bony and undercooked. She was not born special like Yuri. She was not her father's water baby. Babka didn't tell her but Nina knew as much: Dr Alexei was disgusted with the daughter that was born in air.

Babka buried Yuri and Nina's beginnings together in the forest, under the spirit tree, the Mother Pine.

Nina watched Babka peel the cloth from the lump of clay. It came away like a skin, leaving its weave imprinted in the sticky surface. Babka chewed a length of fishing line from a spool. Wound it round the tips of her forefingers and sliced off two grey slabs.

*Here, Nina.*

Nina stood on the verandah, twisting the clay like a dishcloth, and watched the steady kick of Babka's boot on the treadle, her fat knee moving like a butting animal under her black skirts. The slap of the slab onto the wheel, right in the perfect spinning middle. Babka dipped and cupped her blue hand in the water dish, setting straight the drunken wobble of the clay that swelled into a trunk and shrunk back. Nina watched her grandmother coax out a bowl with her solid thumbs. Babka pulled magic from the dirt.

Nina sat on the bottom step to catch the sun's last warmth. Crumbs of clay dropped onto her white socks and onto the pine needle rug. She scrunched out a small sausage body. Rolled a ball head and four stubby legs.

*All right, Nina? All right my little bird?*

I'm nearly fifteen, Nina thought. Clever with words but not clever with hands.

Through the pines and beyond the road, she watched pieces of the lake turning silver. *Our Sacred Sea*, Babka had told her when she was very young. *The Old Man has healing powers*. For millions of years the water had churned in that bottomless stone crater, its hard rim curving out past the horizon.

Summer was over. It had travelled south to shine on the world's other face. On her mother's face. Elena, who skipped across the world like a stone on the lake surface, travelling with the sun. The Circus of the Sun. A mother who could hang by one ankle from a rope. From a hook by her hair. Nina wondered if her mother thought about her.

Her face. Babka said Nina was pretty. Yuri did. Uncle Ilya. It'd been five years since Elena left. A mother who couldn't be still enough. Always spinning out of reach.

*No courage*, Uncle Ilya said. But he brought Nina emails from the police station. Ilya's friend, Yozhin the Commissioner, had a computer. Her mother wrote *Darling* and *Miss you* and *All my love*. Masha repeated her mother's flimsy words aloud until they sounded unbreakable and perfect.

The treadle thumped and creaked. Nina watched Babka score a line with a twig on the belly of the turning bowl. A looping wave. In a month, the winds would rip up the lake and send breakers crashing over the highway. Every year, people smiled and nodded and said: *The Old Man, look at Him, resisting winter again*. The research boats and passenger ferries headed up the river to save their hulls. The tide thickened and dragged and slushed until at last the Old Man bowed out, leaving His final throes frozen to the shore in a curving line. Then He would roam captive under a field of ice and Nina could step out onto the stillness, feel Him raging silently beneath her.

After school, before the light fell, Nina would glissade across the frozen lake to Shaman Rock. The Rock was a broken-off piece of cliff the Old Man had thrown after His daughter, Angara, when she disobeyed Him and followed her lover. The cliff fell on Angara's neck.

*Her tears flowed out and made the river*, Babka said. *If the Old Man becomes too angry, He will tear the rock away from the river mouth and water will flood the earth. God save us all.*

Nina would take a piece of cake and a posy of dried flowers and tuck them into a cleft in Shaman Rock. Then, she'd stand on the stilled rapids with the Rock towering behind her and stare out at the unending white of sea and sky. She'd feel as if something from outside the sky could reach through and pick her up. The silence would turn to a hard whisper under her hood and she'd think herself down to where the golomyanka fish swam with its bones and heart on show. She'd be calm down there, the Old Man's slowness buoying up the fishes, the ice. Keeping her own closed-up heart afloat. She should have been a water baby like her cousin. Under water her edges were blurred and she was not too real. Or too alone.

*You can read a book through a golomyanka*, her teacher said, but Nina wondered

why anyone would.

Babka's thumbs pressed and more bowls came out of her hands. A jug. Vases. They gathered on the verandah like visitors. In a week, Babka would lay a bowl on her cheek to see if the wetness had gone. They'd build a kiln.

*But how do you know how to make a bowl?* Nina asked.

*I told you. It's already there. I grab it by its tail and pull it out. The clay tells you what it wants to be. Look for the picture in your hands. Is that something magic you're making?*

*It's just a mink.*

Last year Nina had made a nerpa seal that looked almost the same as the one that sung and danced at the town aquarium. Babka had put it on the dresser, between the painting of the Madonna and the crucifix that the rosary hung on.

Nina spat on the clay like Babka did to make slip. She scratched the joining places with her fingernail and stuck the four limbs to the torso. Divided the mink's claws.

Babka was always asking her about magic. Nina's grandfather, Diyed, had magic in him. He had died before she was born. His bones were under the ground with thirty thousand others' at the end of the airport runway. He wanted to be buried with his insurgent ancestors.

*A shaman, little birds,* Babka told her and Yuri. *A white shaman. He could call up his protectors to cure anything. Even tuberculosis. Diyed could walk over hot coals. Make coins appear in his mouth. One of his spirits passed to your mama, Yuri, the day she was born.*

Nina knew there wasn't any magic in her but Babka watched for it. Looked into her eyes for the same strange staring of her dead husband and daughter. Every evening she prayed to her Saints. Knelt by the dresser with beads going through her fingers like pills. She asked the Saints to spare her young ones the shaman's sickness. Nina had to help Babka up from praying. Get her a glass of blackberry wine. Babka didn't know what Nina knew. Nina knew her cousin Yuri could cover his eyes and pass his fingers over a page and tell the words.

Their teacher had asked a professor to come from the university to watch him. The professor had driven all the way here a week ago. But Yuri was too shy and

stammering to show him. Sat with his face in his clever hands. After school, the teacher cut Yuri's palms with a birch stick. Then her cousin's grey eyes had swivelled white and he'd thumped to the floor and the teacher pushed Nina away and forced his belt into Yuri's mouth full of spit until the jolting stopped. Ilya knew Yuri had magic in him, too. He'd taken a stick to the teacher. Yozhin arrested him and let him go with a warning. And Ilya had said Yuri was never going to school again.

Nina was glad she didn't have pictures or words in her hands. Only clay sickles under her fingernails. She peeled a sickle out with her teeth and held it on her tongue, then spat it on to the dead pine needles. She would give the mink to Yuri because people didn't like him being different.



## Fire

Uncle Ilya arrived when Babka was pulling apart the little kiln. Nina had taken off her shoes and was sitting on the steps. She felt as cooked and smoky and worn-out as a dried fish. Uncle Ilya got out of the cab and came towards them. He was carrying a parcel.

*Yuri's in the truck. He fitted. I had to stop on the way.*

*Poor little bird.* Babka shook her head. *The wolf has him.*

Nina started to move across the garden to the truck but Ilya caught her arm.

*Leave him quiet a while, Nina. I need to clean him up. Here. Shashlik. Cucumbers.*

So, Babka did know. She knew it was a wolf that walked around Yuri's blood. Chewed up the little bird's wings. Nina hated the magic inside Yuri. The sickness. She took the parcel from her uncle and lay down on her side on the verandah with her arm for a pillow. She cast her eyes away and back, between the truck windscreen and the kiln. She could see the plastic Virgin Mary swinging from Ilya's mirror. When her cousin woke, he wouldn't know where he was. He'd be afraid.

Ilya helped Babka topple the chimney and they dragged away the bricks with pine branches. Broke down the tunnel and two walls. The bricks collapsed outwards into ruins. Babka lifted a bowl from the pit with two sticks and rolled it over on the ground. Nina came down the steps to see. There was no glaze on it. Babka had burnished the bowl smooth with the back of a teaspoon. It looked like it had been lathed out of wood. Scratched into the base, she read *For Ninochka*. Her baby name. Nina kissed her grandmother a thank-you. She glanced up and saw Yuri behind the windscreen, waking, rubbing his hair. Nina heart flickered and she ran and made a little leap over the rubble and picked up Yuri's mink from among the dark pots.

She stood quite still from the shock of the heat. Watched the mink fly slow out of her burning fingers and then smash fast on the bricks. At first, there was no pain. She stood in the pit and looked at her fingertips and knew for a second that Diyed's fire-walking magic was in her. But then, she saw her own scream lifting the crows from the trees as the white-hot embers ignited the fabric of her socks and melted through the soft arches of her feet. Then there was no pain. Only Babka crying out and Uncle Ilya shouting.

*Quick! The Old Man!*

And Ilya picked up Nina and ran into the dark trees, his limp wound up to a gallop. He charged through the pines and onto the highway.

He held his wife like this, Nina thought. Only he was running away from the water. Out of the Old Man. They dropped together over the edge of the road onto the beach and then Ilya was kneeling, his trousers soaked, plunging Nina's feet into the icy waves. She thought she heard her uncle cry, *Oh, Christ, Ana*, as the pines over his shoulder shivered and turned into night.

Nina spent three months lying still and brave. She watched the first snowflakes drop under the hospital eaves. Her mother's messages on her bedside locker were worn at the creases.

*...I hope you are well. Taiwo sends hugs. All my love xxx.*

Taiwo. Perhaps he was jealous her mother had sent all her love and kisses across the sea.

The doctor inspected the scars under Nina's bandages and the nurse called Uncle Ilya to take her home. Ilya had told her Babka's heart was too burnt out to visit and her breath sped up and shallow from the scare of Nina's burning.

*We've sold Babka's house. You're both living with us*, Ilya told her. *You and Babka have my room and I'm bunking with Yuri. We moved all your things. Your clothes and books. Babka's bed.*

Nina couldn't go back to the house that Diyed had built like no other. The verandah not in the back but in front. The fine fretworked shutters he'd carved from a larch tree. Her little bedroom she didn't have to share with anyone. She couldn't imagine living out of sight of the Old Man. But she didn't cry. She hadn't cried for weeks. The accident and the hospital had deadened her.

Outside, the air was cold and still. She'd forgotten what it smelled like, new snow. Clean. Her uncle's arms were strong around her. He'd been a gymnast, like her mother. Nina had seen inside the farm shed where he kept a weight bench and gym apparatus: parallel bars, a high bar and a pommel. Wooden rings hung on cables from the rafters. A thick rope for climbing. Ilya's old gymnasium school had donated their worn equipment

to him. The floor was covered with foam-rubber mats. Yuri liked to flex his arms in front of her. Show off his muscles hardened under his father's training. If Yuri had one of his fits in the gym shed, he could fall and convulse softly on the foam. As gentle and safe as Uncle Ilya's arms.

Ilya lifted her into his truck and covered her with two quilts. He waited for the engine to catch and then reached into the glovebox and handed Nina the burnished bowl with her baby-name underneath. Babka had filled it with licorice sweets. As they left the city, the cab burst with their bitten scent and with the musk and vodka smell of Uncle Ilya. The Virgin Mary under the mirror twirled and smiled her secret smile.

Nina looked for the clay in her fingernails as if it was only yesterday she was sitting on the step pinching out a mink. The bowl fitted exactly in the circle of her palms.

They passed the hotel where Nina's mother worked a year to save for her escape. Then they turned away from the Old Man, away from the bay where ageless pines strode out like giants through the forming ice, their legs exposed roots that burrowed further into the sand with each storm to keep the trees from falling. Her mother could leave this beauty, but Nina never would. She would cling to this place. Be as constant as her mother was fleeting. If she could drill a hole through the ice and send down roots, the Old Man would hold Nina upright, take away the pain in her scars.

They drove another hour, seeing no one but a woman on the highway with her skirt hoisted, urinating in a drift. Ilya braked and skidded and the woman straightened her skirt and came right up to the window and snarled at Nina. Nina knew what she was.

*Yah!* said Ilya, as if he was scaring a charging animal. Opening his eyes wide at the woman behind the glass. *Goat! They reckon she lives on vodka and dirt. Has for thirty years. Well, there must be some nutrition in it because she's not dead yet.*

Nina only nodded, her mouth full of licorice. The witch did look like a goat. Her bony face. A jutting chin with long, muddy teeth overbiting her top lip. A moustache. Her black hair though, woven in a neat plait over her shoulder.

*Mad goat.* Ilya shouted. He straightened the wheels and accelerated.

A clod of snow thumped against Nina's door and sprayed crystals over the window.

The tyre chains bit into the narrow road that took them at last to the farm. Ilya

stopped the truck and got out to bolt the gates behind them. They were trapped inside the high fences. Nina smiled for her uncle but she hated it here. She hated the yard with its wooden cages, row upon row of low-roofed crates, their netting fronts open to the snow. The squares tufted with fluff where the animals had grazed in constant circles against the wires.

*Three hundred cages, five hundred furs now.*

Ilya so proud of his farm. He carried her between the lines of pens. She looked at the young minks and sables and fitches, rotating their heads and swaying in their cells. The bitter winds relentlessly thickening their coats. Nina knew they couldn't stand the scent of one another. Lone creatures stupefied by the piss of their overlapping territories. Nina closed her eyes and concentrated her pity instead on the little hiccup of Ilya's limp.

He had fallen from a climbing rope when he was nineteen, waiting for the Olympic Games. Broken both legs, damaged his spine. While he was lying in traction, his team mate Elena was vaulting and somersaulting to a silver and a bronze medal. When Ilya could stand again, he travelled to a house beside water. To find the woman whose face he'd seen in the photo beside Elena's bed. Elena's elder sister, Ana. He married her within a month. Ilya's brother came to the wedding. He fell in love with Elena whose heart had been bruised. Alexei and Elena were married, too, in the church of St Nikolas. Yuri and Nina were already begun.

Babka said that the State Fur Farm was consolation for Ilya's lost kneecaps. It wasn't any consolation for his lost Olympic medals. Babka kept Elena's medals in the sun-and-moon box that Ilya had carved for a wedding gift, the bronze and silver doves with their olive branches hidden away so Ilya didn't have to be reminded of anything.

Nina opened her eyes when she heard Yuri call. He was standing in the doorway of the shed where the killing was done.

*N-Nina. Welcome home.*

She waved and Yuri held up two handfuls of ears. Scrawny, skinless corpses hanging from them. All marbled blood and fat. The paws cut off.

*Ilya's got me practising on rabbits.*

*Salt those skins, then wash up,* said Ilya.

While Nina had been healing, Yuri had grown the voice and body of a man.

Yuri swung the pink and white hunks into a bin. Nina looked away and straight into the eyes of a buff-faced mink. A sweet, down-turned smile. It put its webbed paws on the netting and began to chew at a wire. You must miss the water, Nina thought. Swimming. The mink twisted its head suddenly to bite at its rump. It had a red sore there, perfectly round, as if a molten coin had been pressed into its flesh. Nina hoped the mink was born here, not caught in one of Ilya's traps he set along the forest stream. She wondered if the clay mink she made for Yuri was still lying in the rubble in Babka's garden, limbless among the snow-covered ashes.

*You'll be good for us Nina.* Ilya carried her into the warm house and there was Babka. She was sitting at the dining table, all the fat gone out of her cheeks. She lifted Nina's hair, long past her shoulders. She squeezed Nina's face – *Ninotchka, my littlest bird come back to me* – and prodded a fork wound with spaghetti and pale sausage at her granddaughter's lips. But Nina couldn't bear to swallow anything.

## Farm

Nina's feet healed purple and shiny and she tested each step, treading as tenderly as her grandmother. The grafts contracted and pulled at their strange moorings. It felt as though she was walking on crumbled glass.

*The martyrs suffered worse, Babka reminded her.*

When Spring had melted The Old Man's prison, Nina would walk on the marble sand where the giant trees strode, and leave completely different footprints.

On Sunday, Uncle Ilya let Yuri drive them in the truck down from the farm. Babka didn't have enough breath to walk to the verandah steps. She put her rosary into Nina's hands.

*Say good morning to Father Giorgi from me.*

*Ilya could give you a piggyback.*

*Ha! Let me get back to my cooking.*

Nina sat beside her cousin in the Church of Saint Nikolas. Steam rose from the worshippers' coats and Yuri's stutter vanished in the hymns. Ilya fell asleep as Father Giorgi's voice, like incense, floated over them. They knew the ancient story of the Trinity by heart, the golden tree with three branches bent toward the earth.

*And on it, the priest said, white birds; white, white as snow.*

Then Nina forgot to cross herself because she was looking at Yuri's poor bruised face and thinking of the coffins stacked outside and how she intended to die in summer so she wouldn't have to lie on the snow like Yuri's mother, Ana, did, waiting for the earth to thaw.

The sun came back and the world melted and turned from white to grey to brown. Yuri drove Nina in his rusted Nissan to her new school. In gym class, she showed the girls the place on her thigh where the skin was harvested for soles and they all wanted to be her friend. The commissioner's wife was her English teacher. Nina wanted to be like her.

After school, she boiled potatoes for dinner and went to help Ilya. Ilya opened the sleeping boxes and the animals dived to the ends of their cages. He threw out handfuls of chaff. Nina refilled the boxes with fresh nesting straw and shook the pesticide can over it. Ilya twisted a latch and caught a fitch by the tail, pulled it through the gnawed hole of its nesting box. Its neighbours were running circles. Floor, wall, ceiling, around and around like toys looping on strings. Her uncle put the fitch into her arms. It lay still and bewildered. Why don't you run? she wondered, looking into its brown-masked face. But it lay like a pet cat, not even biting at her glove. The wildness frightened out of it. She cuddled the fitch, stroked the yellowy coat. It was a breeder, safe for now from the gas box.

She knew, tomorrow, or the day after, Ilya would hook the farmbike to the trailer and tow the chest into the yard. He'd check his clipboard and find a blue-painted number on a cage. The animal would screech and struggle against Ilya's glove. Cling to the wire. Knowing without thinking that it had to save itself. Ilya would pull it off the door and go with it, go with the momentum of the animal, the same escape every one of them tried in their minute of freedom, a bolt of fur arcing across the gap to grab at another cage. Holding on for dear, pathetic life. Ilya would laugh at the leaping fur's spirit, its audacity. Unhook its claws and throw it into the chest. Then he'd drive along the row to the next number.

Ilya stroked the fitch in Nina's arms. His leather glovetips on the underside of her breast. He gave the thumb of her glove a tweak. She handed the lucky animal back to him.

Nina conjugated, her voice coming out in clouds. I need a specialist. He needs a specialist. We need a specialist. Her English books spread over the gym shed. Some nights, Ilya let farm workers into the shed. Or labourers from the mine. The men dipped their fists into the chalk box and swung slow circles around the high bar or spun and scissored over the pommel. Tonight it was just Ilya. She watched him repeat his faded routine on the rings, his body strung against the rafters, muscles quivering in a crucifix.

When he had gone, Nina lay back and fell asleep, breathing in dust and the rank sweat of old rubber. She woke to find Yuri standing astride her hips in the half-light. He

pushed his toes into the foam and bounced her. Then he knelt, his thighs pressed to hers, and with his eyes closed, passed his hands over her. Touched her face. He'd been rendering the fat he'd scraped from underneath dead fur and his fingers were silky with mink oil. Yuri crept his fingers between Nina's coat buttons and rested them on her breast.

*I'm reading your heart*, he said. The heat came out of his hand and made her heart loud.

*What do I say?*

*You w-want to do it with me. That's w-what you're thinking.*

*No I am not thinking that. I don't.*

Yuri's eyes were open and staring and Nina looked at the traces of blood and fur under his nails and imagined him touching her down there. She let him kiss her anyway. He had a new bruise on his mouth, from falling. He tasted of smoke. Lard. She pushed him off her and sprang across the foam to the bar and hung there upside-down, blood rushing to her cheeks. She didn't want to grow up fast like the girls at the market, like her mother, fifteen and a baby growing inside her. She didn't want men looking at her.

*Babka prays to the Saints for you, you know.*

*I can't help it.*

*I know.*

*When are the Saints g-going to save me?*

*They won't if you don't come to church.*

Nina held her shins and rocked on the axle of the polished bar. They must mind Yuri, Babka says, because his grandmother has seen him now, flailing around the floor with the same twisted face of her own dead husband. The wolf thrashing inside him.

Nina dropped to the mats. *Where were you in the weekend? Father Giorgi was asking.*

*Nowhere. I'm going away soon. To learn to be a real shaman.*

Nina spent Saturday at the harbour square. She had practised driving Babka's motorbike on the road outside the farm. She could drive all the way to the lake now. She'd driven slowly past their old home. People were sitting in chairs on the verandah, laughing and eating. Kids scooted plastic trikes along the dirt. Babka's vegetable garden



was weeds. Nina had to lift her goggles onto her forehead so she could see the road again.

The sidecar was loaded with Babka's pottery and birch-bark paintings. *Please buy this authentic painting of the Sacred Sea.* Nina practised her English with the tourists that were waiting for the hydrofoil. *Yes, of course, a genuine shaman pottery.*

In the afternoon she used a few coins to buy a glass of hot chocolate, and lozenges for Babka's cough.

*Yuri. Tell me where you go.*

*To Lilia's p-place. She's teaching me the songs. M-magic. How to dance.*

*The witch?* The wild woman who frightened Nina in the road and who lived in a hovel near the American drill-site. *Everyone at school says she eats dirt. The miners give her vodka for sex.*

*That's not true. She's a shaman. Like me. D-don't tell my father.*

*Lilia's not the only one good at being dumb, you know.*

Then her meanness, or the fear of his father knowing his secret, made Yuri's eyes roll back and his body stiffen and send dancing shocks through the foam. When the fit was over, Nina lay down beside him and wiped away his spit and covered him with the flap of her coat. She was sorry. Having no words, like Lilia, would be an awful thing.

She lay looking up at the rafters. Life would go on like this, Nina thought. Among restless spirits and desperate animals. She would bear the animals pacing endless laps of their cages and the stink of whale meat on her hands. She would bear the knives that were never clean. She would even bear what Yuri's mother, Ana, could not - the minks and sables screaming in the gas chest, leaving their tiny claws in the splintered walls. Because she must look after Babka with her tired heart and Yuri with his wolf gnawing and sad Uncle Ilya who carried her into the lake. She would try and remember what Father Giorgi said. That the martyr, Christ, oppressed and broken, wearing his crown of thorns, showed them how to humbly bear life.

Yuri breathed his weird dreaming rhythm against her. When he came to, his face looked very old, as if he had been bearing his life for centuries.

## Umilenie

When Yuri arrived back from the border his grey eyes were piercing but his body was calm. There were no bruises on his face because, Nina knew, he had given himself up to the spirits. He drove her to the Old Man and they sat on the pebble beach.

*You look grown-up, Nina. And beautiful.* He hugged her close and kissed her hair. He smelled of the last of summer.

*We're grown up, aren't we.*

*I'm a shaman now. The boo initiated me. I'm all right.*

*I know you are.*

A stand of yellow-needled larches rose in the distance, the silver light of the Old Man caught between them.

Babka got up from her chair and opened the sun-and-moon box. She took out a parcel of yellow cloth and laid it on the clean tablecloth.

*Open it,* she said.

Inside was a small roof shingle.

Babka turned it over and propped it on the butter dish and crossed herself. Nina did, too.

*She came from a church,* Babka said. *Your great-great-great-grandmother rescued Her.*

The picture was almost all black and gold paint. A few thin outlines of red and blue. The wood had the shine of egg-white. Like the glaze Babka's kiln put on her bowls. The Madonna's face was a glow of gold and Her hands and her Baby's body were gold, too. A gold halo surrounded them. The Madonna seemed to melt out of the blackness of the black paint, the coated layers of it. She gazed at them. Not at Her Son, a skinny, old child who lay on her black lap looking up at her, but at them, the watchers. Or even beyond them, inside them, to something both horrible and wonderful.

*Umilenie,* said Babka. *That is a look that will make a murderer repent.*

The Madonna's dark eyes held Nina. Eyes that were somehow too knowing, a place where happiness and sadness met.

*Your great-great-great-grandmother's parents were at a meeting in the church when soldiers came and barred the doors. The government called our ancestors 'insurgents'. They were revolutionaries. Some of the children were waiting for the meeting to finish. They were playing in the graveyard when they heard the soldiers shouting. Their parents hammering on the doors. Guns went off. They hid behind the gravestones. Their parents handed the artefacts to them out a broken window. Candlesticks and holy books. Shawls and the icons. 'Run home', they whispered. 'Run home and hide.' Your little ancestor carried the Madonna home and hid her in the woodshed. Some of the children were captured, but not her. She was as fast as a fox.*

*Was she scared?*

*She was terrified, but the Madonna gave her courage. Then the soldiers set fire to the church.*

*The girl was already home?*

*Yes.*

*I'm glad.*

*Your great-great-great-grandfather kicked a hole in the burning wall and escaped but he was caught and shot. Babka pointed to the middle of her forehead. We know this because they found the bodies when they were building the airport runway. All those revolutionary skulls had a hole right here.*

*Oh.*

*Everyone voted not to disturb their bones any more. The workers left them lying together and concreted the runway over them.*

*The story had left Babka gasping for breath and she had to sit down again.*

*Nina hadn't known about the runway. She already knew the story about the burning church. It was printed on a wall at the museum beside the cabinet of artefacts. She wondered why Babka hadn't given the Madonna to the museum. Why she still kept Her hidden in Diyed's sun-and-moon box. Perhaps she needed the Madonna to keep her brave.*

*She didn't see her mother again?*

*No. Bring me that exercise book. Under the letters.*

Nina dug in the sun-and-moon box and gave the book to her grandmother. Babka opened the pages and handed it back. *There is a poem your uncle wrote when he and your father came to us. Diyed told them the story before he passed.*

I looked at my uncle's handwriting.

Icon (for Ana)

The insurgent Madonna  
was saved from a burning church  
hidden in a woodshed where  
the cold kept Her holy.  
Under the Irkutsk runway  
dirt eats around the children's  
wrist bones, a ghost of red thread  
tied there by their mothers for  
luck. The planes roll over them.  
In the museum  
the Madonna trembles. She  
cannot even look at Her  
long-limbed Child, His snowy wrists,  
His bloodline a sadness. Her  
umilenie eyes are dark  
irises that can bring  
a criminal to his knees,  
ecstasy and sorrow both,  
cast in them that night  
when incense and candle smoke  
veiled the hallowed breath  
of fifty mouths kissing Her  
white hand, a priest adoring  
the fathers' partisan guns.

Umilenie. The doors  
blazing down, Her Child's Father  
nowhere to be seen.

*I saw that and thought, that Ilya is a poet, Babka said. He will be alright for Ana.  
Then I read to the end and thought: He has no respect.*

*Why?*

*You see, he is blaming God for not rescuing the revolutionaries. 'Where is God?'  
he is asking.*

*You can't always tell a man's heart by his words, Nina said. Ilya prays to God.  
I've seen him.*

*Well. He needs to. These things are yours now. Yuri will have Diyed's clothes.*

Nina picked up the yellow cloth and covered the Madonna and her Baby. She made a pile for Yuri - the clothes, the copper breastplate, and the wooden staves that Diyed had carved into horses' heads.

On Saturdays, Yuri put on his grandfather's robes, sewn with bells, and performed in the harbour square. People threw coins and he danced away their illnesses.

*Will Lilia dance with you? Nina said.*

*I won't let her very often. She's only a little shaman. She can read dreams, maybe  
frighten away devils. I like her.*

*But she's so old.* But Nina smiled because Yuri's words were mended together.

*Babka told me Lilia was hanging around the farm when I was away, and Ilya  
drove her off with a stick. Still, that's his solution to everything. If you can't fix it, beat  
it. He can't touch me now I have The Faith.*

Nina had never heard so many words come out of Yuri's mouth. She didn't want to know that her uncle's arms had tricked her. She didn't want to know that the falling-bruises were something different.

*Do you love Lilia?*

*I only have to be kind to her, Nina. I love someone else.*

*Who?*

*You.*

*Oh, Yuri. You can't. Find someone better than me. Someone really magic, like you are.*

*I won't marry anyone, he said.*

Nina didn't go back to school. She looked after Babka and cooked for Uncle Ilya. When Yuri was at home, he would only take white foods: cheese and yoghurt and milk.

In the early morning, Nina went with Ilya to the feed-shed. She waited until he'd churned together the meal and fish guts and then she pushed the wheelbarrow under the mixer and the food coiled from the pipe like excrement. A gloveful of brown slop went on the roof of each cell. The animals stood on their hind legs and thrust their mouths against the wire to lap at their breakfast.

She hardly had the stomach to eat. She washed Babka and sat her in her chair and swept under the beds and in corners that had never been swept. She couldn't stop herself lifting the lid of the sun-and-moon box to look at the shaman's clothes. Underneath the exercise book, she found letters to Babka, the pension one and ones from Elena written when she was a girl gymnast. A pile of Circus of the Sun envelopes wound with a red shoelace. Perhaps Babka had tied it there for happiness. There was a folded newspaper she had never seen before. A few tattered pages called *The High Bar* written by students at the Gymnasium School. A photo of her mother in a leotard on the front page. She thumbed through it. There were essays and a poetry section. Ilya's name caught her eye. His schoolboy poem was called Glory:

I train for you,  
my heart lifts to the rings and  
surges with pride as I inlocate,  
I dedicate myself to the  
glorious Motherland...

In a velvet box, Elena's medals. Nina looked at the bronze and silver doves with the olive twigs in their beak. She put the striped ribbons over her head and they swung from her neck as she scrubbed the floor.

When Babka was sleeping, Nina drove the motorbike to the market. An American tourist gave her ten dollars to buy him smoked omul and he ate in the sidecar. She drove him to the museum and to the Church of St Nikolas. She told him the in careful English the legend of Shaman Rock. These were her places. As familiar to her as her own face.

On the first day of February, Ilya slaughtered a hundred mink for the fur auction. That night, Babka forgot to breathe altogether. Nina rolled over in the morning and found her cold in the bed they shared. She got up, cried for a while and then brushed her grandmother's hair. She arranged the rosary in Babka's hands and placed the Madonna on the pillow before fetching Ilya. Yuri lit his incense and waved it over Babka's body until Uncle Ilya stopped him and sent him to fetch the priest. Nina put her lips to her grandmother's ear and whispered, *I don't want you to leave me. I love you the best. God bless my little Babka. God bless.*

Father Giorgi prayed for Babka's soul. He told Ilya there was a grave already dug in the ground. Nina wept and smoothed the circle of her bowl that Babka pulled out of the clay with her clever hands.

*She'll walk in Heaven soon with our Glorious King, said Father Giorgi. She'll be reunited with all the ones she's lost.*

Except me, thought Nina. She's lost me.

## Ross

Yuri had found temporary work labouring on the American drill-site. He wouldn't kill any more for his father. He told Nina that one day he'd make a spell to set the minks' spirits free. *They'll rise over the fences like Babka's did and fly back to the lake shore. To the forest.* Yuri helped feed the drill into the permafrost and lifted out cores of earth from kilometres underground. By sundown, his spirit was too exhausted to bother him.

One night he brought home a geologist. Uncle Ilya seemed pleased Yuri had made a friend.

*Ross wants to find out how the natives live.* Yuri laughed.

The men listened to music and played pontoon. Ilya brought out the vodka and soon there was little need for language. Nina served them clumsy meat pancakes and wished for Babka's hands.

Ross flipped the pages of a small dictionary. *I study. Excuse me. Sister play?*

He wasn't American.

I speak a little English, Nina told him.

Ross dealt the cards and asked Nina about her life. She told him all the good things.

*You're very beautiful,* he said.

She liked his clean fingernails and hair. The creases around his eyes.

*I'm thirty,* he said.

She told him she was twenty.

*That's not such a difference. The girls here seem to go for older men. I guess you grow up fast in this climate. Would you go out with me?*

*I don't understand? Go out?*

*A date.*

Yuri's eyes had grown big. He did a shaman trick; threw his voice out of the wall so they would stop talking without him.



## Ice

*Yuri can chaperone*, Ilya said.

Nina and Ross sat in Yuri's backseat and he drove them down to the harbour. They had tea and pastries in a cafe. Then Yuri followed the harbour to the bay of stilted trees and drove the car over the road's icy lip.

*I suppose the ice is safe?* Ross said. He put his arm around Nina.

*It is one metre here.*

Yuri watched Nina in the mirror and put his foot down hard on the pedal. The Nissan moved very fast away from the shore. When the trees were no longer giants, Yuri disengaged the gear and pulled on the handbrake. The car spun on its locked wheels, turning its occupants in sickening circles over the ice. Ross' body pressed Nina hard into the door. The sky turned to a whirling fog. It was a boys' challenge. The terrifying game they played to prove they were men. Nina closed her eyes and begged the Old Man to keep them safe.

*Stop. Enough, Yuri. Please.*

Ross clung to the torn upholstery. The ice hurtled under the holes rusted through the floor.

*You're crazy, Yuri. Oh God*, he cried and twisted away from Nina to vomit against the window.

Then Yuri thought he had won. He pushed the gearstick forward and wrenched the wheels out of their skid.

They rode in silence back to the mine. Nina wouldn't leave Ross' cabin. She watched Yuri stop the car along the road and open the back door. Saw him dig his gloves into the snow and scrub them across the streaked window. Then he stomped across the white field towards the pines where Lilia's hut was hidden.

Nina wasn't sorry. She took off her coat and sat on the bed until Ross had washed his face and put on new clothes. He was still shaking.

*I'm sorry*, she said.

She lay down and waited for his weight. He put his mouth on her neck. It was barely a kiss. A grazing of lips and breath. His gentle hand on her hip. She pressed against

his cheek, his bone in the curve of her neck and felt his fingers tracking the line under her navel. She tried to feel something. Love. Wanting. She imagined Yuri trapped in the witch's hut, Lilia moving in quiet frenzy under him. The drum beating and the world blurring around its axle.

*Is it all right?* Ross asked.

Nina didn't know why she didn't feel anything. She pushed Ross away and sat up. *No*, she said. *Later*. But she wasn't sure how she could ever do it. Look at him there, or touch his skin, or let him put himself inside her.

## Birth

It was noon and Nina's cousin found her sitting on the cabin steps. She was waiting for Ross to come back for lunch.

Yuri's eyes were flicking everywhere and he pulled at his clothes as if they were giving him a rash.

*Are you okay? Is it the wolf?*

*Get the doctor, Yuri said. The baby is coming.* And he was gone, through the gap in the fence and away into the forest.

Nina left the sandwich she had made on the top step and ran to where her bike was hidden in the trees. She pushed it hard through the mud and out to the road and started it. She had enough petrol to get to her father's house. Envy worked its claws into her chest. Envy, and a sadness she shouldn't admit. How had she missed it? The witch was having her cousin's baby.

In half an hour she was in town. The snow was thawing and the gutters guzzling streams. She passed a group of fat men doing calisthenics in the park in their speedos and shoes. Hefting a medicine ball to each other. Their pink-slapped paunches. Some were looking up anxiously at a bank of snow clouds moving towards them. A white boxer pup dragged a woman by its leash. The woman stopped while it squatted on the cobbles. *Good girl*, she said. Smiled as Nina puttered past.

*I am a good girl.*

She knew her father had returned the night before from one of his travelling obstetric shows. All the rich people wanted him now for their water births. *He's just the berries*, people said. She knocked until he came to the door. He looked bleary and smelled slightly drunk.

*Nina. Nice to see you. You're covered in mud.*

*Alexei. It's the witch. She's in labour. Yuri's the father.*

That woke her father up.

*Jesus. Ilya, grandfather to a witch-baby! Well, well.*

*Ilya doesn't know. He'd kill Yuri.* Nina wanted to kill Yuri. For keeping his secret from her.

*It's all right. I've got no clinic today.*

Alexei drove his Volvo out of the town and along the highway to where the forest began. *Stop now*, Nina said and he parked against an embankment so he had to climb after Nina through the passenger door onto the road. He took his doctor's bag from the boot and she led him towards the hut. In the distance they could hear Lilia struggling, her madness rattling trees. By the time they got to the clearing, Alexei's shoes were caked, too. Spits of mud up the back of his fancy windcheater.

The claw-footed bathtub stood on four bricks. Yuri was standing under the lean-to roof and stoking a fire that burned in a pit below the bath. He'd changed into the shaman clothes. A headdress made of feathers poked into a band stuck with gold coins. His reindeer boots. Hanging over his coffee-coloured robes was a bunch of ropes, felted, like a scarf made of snakes.

*Why didn't you say anything?* Nina couldn't make Yuri look at her.

*Thank God. Crazy people with sense.*

Alexei was praising the bath. Lilia sat in it. Up to her sleeves in water. She had on a peppery mink coat and Yuri's ushanka with the earflaps tied under her chin. Nina could see her blunt nose and the faint streak of her moustache and her broken teeth biting on a larch stick. Her breasts, loud and wet and veiny, pushed bare from the coat. They were startlingly beautiful. The mound of her stomach simmered. A dark road ran down from her navel. The witch was a landscape. Nina could imagine small people travelling over her. Picking mushrooms off her tall knees. Sliding over her hill. Seeking refuge in her cleavage from the monsters that no doubt slunk in the caves of her armpits. She was a rolling fur-covered island in a lake. A tide mark of dirt and hairs washing up on its banks.

*Water is good. But cold water. Cold. Your child will be weak otherwise.* Dr Alexei pushed up his jacket sleeve and unbuckled his watch.

*Stand away, Doctor.* Yuri fed the fire with pine branches from the stack beside the hut. The bells sewn to his robes jingled. Nina and her father stood back and scuffed their shoes on the woodpile while Yuri put his hand into the water and then stirred in cold from a bucket as a small yielding to his uncle. The water rose to Lilia's breastbone. She growled through the stick and the contraction that came moved her around the bath.

Stretched the mustard-coloured lining of the mink coat. She pushed her feet on the enamel and lifted her long thighs and the smooth mound of her stomach rode above the filmy water. Her shoulders writhed and her back arched with the agony of dividing herself in two. Nina wanted to run away. Yuri looked as if he would run with her. His eyes panicking. A snow cloud had sunk towards them, its mist probing the tops of the trees.

Alexei slapped at his shoulders. *Temperature's dropping. I knew this was a false thaw. Still more winter to come.*

*Let him check your baby*, Nina said, and Yuri nodded.

The witch had her eyes closed. She was gone in the aftershocks of her body. Winded. Panting. She snarled when Alexei stuck his hand between her legs but she let him examine her. Like a hurt animal lets a human inspect its paw.

*She'll be pushing soon.*

Nina looked into the water and saw the black pelt of her father's arm in the witch's fuzz. The fur of the mink sucked on Alexei's elbow.

Yuri held a handful of twigs against the fire and when their ends caught, he wafted the smoke around Lilia's head. Blew it in her face until she coughed. Nina knew the smell. Juniper to ward off evil. Yuri began to stamp in a circle around the bathtub. Alexei lit a cigar and stamped, too, kicking at an ember that was scorching his trouser leg. When the next contraction came, Nina wanted to put her hand on the witch's arm, stroke her head, say something, but instead she went and got a log and flipped it into the fire. She wondered how her mother had endured having her. A girl who witnesses this should forgive her mother, she thought. Forgive her for a moment at least. Nina might almost forgive the witch lusting after her cousin. Trapping him.

Yuri lifted his knees high and stamped the earth. He held up his palms. Sang a song to the thick sky above the trees. *Come down sky of the wolf and help me. A man with a peaceful heart is here. Come down Great Sky please.*

The sky was coming down. Alexei rolled his eyes and took his watch out of his pocket. They crouched on the damp ground, listening to the logs crackle and the witch growling. He hadn't finished his cigar when Lilia began to grunt. Yuri leapt up. Alexei crushed the cigar tip on a stone, licked the ash and put the stub in his doctor's bag. It was

a genuine doctor's bag with a hinged, fold-out top. Six or seven years ago when she was just a child, Nina had loved opening the leather compartments and lining up the speculums and clamps. The vials and syringes. Once she took a suture needle and stitched the soft legs of her doll together with silk. Her mother had found it and shaken Nina and asked her if any man or boy had touched her in a bad way without her permission. *Did Uncle Ilya?* Elena said.

Yuri danced in a trance around them. He had forgotten the fire. Lilia spat out the stick. She put all her biting strength into pushing out her baby. Made huge, shoving, animal noises. Nina was surprised men didn't come running from the miners' cabins. This murder happening in a bathtub in the forest. Lilia's filthy nails warping the tin sides as the baby's head swelled along inside her.

*How are you liking it, Nina?* Her father asking her so casually, with his hand on the witch's parts.

She couldn't tell if he was teasing her or not. She didn't know why her father would choose to do this for a living. It was repulsive. Inhuman. But she couldn't stop looking at the tortured hills of Lilia moving above the water. *Here she comes. Breathe slow now.* The tripey bulge of the baby's head in the shallows of the bath. More black hair. The water suddenly turning the colour of Babka's wine and the baby gushing out like a fish.

Nina swore to herself, I am never doing that.

*It's a miracle,* she said.

The baby hung at the bottom of the bath until a last contraction delivered the placenta. Dr Alexei brought the baby to the surface and laid it on its mother's breasts. It was the ugliest thing Nina had ever seen, worse than the slimy kits that would soon fill the nursery crates. It lay like a wrinkled seal on its mother. Like a smoked omul.

*He's quite early. No fat on him. See the lanugo.* Her father put his hairy hand over the baby's hairy back and joggled it to make it wake up. Then he picked it up by the scrawny bottom and closed his mouth over the baby's face. The baby made a noise like a bubble bursting and opened its eyes. Alexei placed it again on the witch's cleavage.

Yuri had come back into himself. He put up his arms and cried out, *Thanks to the wolf-sky for this son.*

The first flakes of the new snow landed on his face.

The witch pulled off her hat and her black hair unwound and fell over the bath rim. She lay back with her eyes closed. She had laboured a whole night and morning. Nina didn't blame her for not putting her arms around her hairy son. Yuri leaned into Lilia, his snake scarf taking a drink. Alexei trawled the placenta out of the bath. Another ugly, livid thing.

*We have to check it's come away whole, he said to Nina. My God, you don't see that often. If ever. Nina, look. That's a papyraceous twin.*

Her father, grinning, was holding up the placenta like a butcher showing off a cow liver. Dangling from it by a stringy trace, were the remains of another baby. A paper baby. Flattened and fragile.

*He's drunken the life out of this little reeba, said her father, the paper baby twisting. Under his breath, he said, Road-kill.*

Yuri and Nina looked at the dead twin. It was a badly-sewn and meanly-stuffed doll with one inked full-stop for an eye.

Alexei sat the placenta on the square of plywood the witch had been sitting on to stop her buttocks burning. He wiped his hands on his trousers and reached into the doctor's bag for his surgical scissors. The paper twin wafted in the pink water.

There was a crunch of vessels and the living baby was suddenly alone in the world. Alexei closed a white plastic clamp on the stump of his cord.

Obscene, Nina thought. And the snowflakes, so gentle and perfect, slipping down quickly around them. The living baby trying to latch on to the witch's milk.

Nina went into the hut and found a towel hanging stiff by the stove. She crushed it and shook it as smooth as she could and gave it to Yuri. He wrapped the baby in it while she helped Lilia climb out of the bath. The red tide shrunk back from its silt. Lilia let the mink coat splash and she stood, shivering, under the spilling sky. She picked a strew of pine needles off Yuri's scarf and fed them into her mouth. Yuri's face was glowing. The rare smile that troubled men have, as stunning and brief as a firework. He lifted a strand of hair off Lilia's cheek and nodded and touched the baby's forehead. The

witch nodded, too. Her goatish face almost beautiful. Nina's heart plonked on her ribs and she looked away.

It was possibly the cleanest the witch had been in her forty years. Walking hunched over like that, naked. Her stomach a bulge of dough. She whined a little as she steadied herself on Yuri's arm. Water and blood and the essence of her dead baby dripped from her, over the ground and into her hut.

Nina followed her cousin inside. He balanced his baby on one arm and handed her a jar. She unscrewed the lid and Yuri picked out the last pickle and ate it. *Tell him to put the other baby in.* He handed her a bottle of vodka from an assortment on the floor.

Nina gave the pickle jar to her father. *He wants the dead one in here.*

*Idiot*, said Alexei, but he leaned over the bath and sloshed the jar around in the witch's soup and shook it out. He broke the seal on the vodka bottle and sculled some. Then he poured the vodka into the jar, trimmed the papyraceous twin from its shrivelled cord and slipped it into its new home.

Nina shifted the board Lilia had sat on and she pulled out the bath plug and watched the embers turn to steam. Her father leapt back as the gush of the baby's birthwater spread over the dirt. The snow was falling fast now, settling like white ash on their clothes and on the trees. Powdering the ground.

*I don't know what they want done with that.* Nina waved at the lump of offal in the scum of the bathwater. *Probably come in handy for some curse.*

*Leave it.*

*I'm not touching it.*

Inside the stifling hut, the stove pinged with heat. Pods and flowers and grasses hung in drastic bunches from the roof battens. Too close, Nina thought, to the kerosene lamps. Wooden relics and feathered masks wilted from the walls. Enough to scare a new baby half to death. A baby-half to death. The dirt floor was covered with rugs. Against the back wall, a low platform made of crate-wood with a thin sheet of foam on it. Lilia was kneeling on this bed with the towel between her legs.

This hard bed where her cousin slept with the witch.

Where he had put that baby in her.

It wasn't one of his best spells.



Alexei handed the paper twin to Yuri and took a lamp from the ceiling hook. The witch lay down and let the doctor push his fingers into her slack stomach - *to make sure her uterus is shrinking* - and then he pulled the dirty quilt over her. Nina didn't know why her father had to share all that information.

*She'll be fine. Lots of fluids. For godsake get her some pads.* Alexei threw a few coins on the bed. His shadow was gigantic on the ceiling planks as he rehung the lamp.

Yuri brought the baby to the witch. The baby snuffled under the quilt, its milky grey eyes bewildered as it looked somewhere into the middle distance. Nina wondered what it could see. What it was thinking. If it had even thought its first thought yet. She watched Yuri crouching by the stove, wiping out the tea cups with his cuff, swirling the pot, careful and dutiful. Setting everything out on the lid of the sun-and-moon box that his father had carved for his mother. The witch cried happily, her mouth shut, the bulge of her teeth showing under her lip. She sounded like a mewling kit. The baby hadn't cried once. In an alcove above the bed, the paper twin floated. The strange little glimmer of pickle-baby. What would it have been like? Nina wondered. He? She?

*So Yuri, a father now.* Alexei patted him on back. *What will you tell your father?*

*He won't know.*

*No. All right. It's probably better that way.*

*Thank you, Uncle.*

*We'll go now. Give the tea to Lilia.*

Yuri handed his uncle a bottle of vodka. They shook hands and pressed shoulders. A felt snake slithered down Alexei's back. Nina sniffed and walked over the rugs to the door. She pulled it open. Two crows jumped out of the bathtub and flew up to the lean-to roof. The falling snow was a curtain. She was pleased to stand in the steady torrent of it. To get out of the witch's hut. Breathe. Yuri's hut and the baby's too, now. In the place the witch's blood had fallen, Nina watched worms twist out of the powdered earth and scatter, their pink bodies squirming towards the forest.

Her father began running towards the car, his bag bouncing off his thigh. *Come on, Nina.* The world was soft and silent. Nina thought of the tea Yuri had made, cooling in the dirty cups. She would be happy to never see her cousin again.

## Nina

Nina woke and looked at her clock. It was just after seven thirty. She remembered the first thing she remembered every morning. That Babka was dead and always would be. She heard the porch door open and shut and the faint gruff sounds of Ilya and Grom. She could smell cooking. She took her clothes off the chair and dressed under the quilts. The air was ice. Her clothes colder than that. Ilya's truck engine was trying to turn over. Where was he going in the dark?

On the floor by the cupboard, she found Babka's December coat. The lining was perished and the fragile fur smelled like dust but she put it on and went out to the squat toilet. The indoor flush had stopped working with the first snow. She skated back inside, stamping her feet and realised how warm the little house was. On the table was the muddle of her jigsaw. Crumbs and empty glasses. She thought tiredly about starting bread. Pulled on another pair of socks and her boots. The truck engine whinnied on and on but didn't catch. Nina opened the front door and went onto the porch.

Grom was standing on the snow. His ears were up and he was looking off towards Ilya's truck, padding back and forth at the reach of his chain. Yelping.

*Quiet*, she said and he came up the step to her and put his nose in her mitten. His claws ticked on the porch.

The finished moon was sheltering in the eaves of the pines but she couldn't see clearly in the darkness. Only the outlines of the buildings and cages and the truck. She heard the last dead click of the starter and Ilya got down from the cab and started walking quickly down the driveway.

*Uncle!* she shouted but he didn't turn. Torchlight flashed on the iron gates. Above Ilya's shoulder Nina saw the black stick of his rifle barrel. One gate swung open and then Ilya was gone. She untied Grom and hauled him inside.

Dough stuck in the fur of her sleeves, and flour. The bidding smell of bread filled the quiet house. Dawn. Nina was wishing Ilya home because she would have to go out and grind up the meal and fish for the animals. She didn't know if she could do it herself,

lift the sacks to pour them over the grinder, hose in the right amount of water. Then she heard him.

He was cutting firewood.

She turned on the outside lights and went onto the porch and saw he wasn't. Not firewood. Her uncle's axe was battering through the cages. The blade going into the wire of the cages along the fence, smashing in the rooves and frames.

*Hey! Stop!* she called and Grom ran out past her and started to bound around Ilya, who was going mental with the axe. Her uncle sounded like a dog himself. *Huh, huh*, with each blow. Grom barking and dodging his master's boots, his wild swinging arms. Ilya hacked at the supports that held the rack of cages and the whole row of them lunged sideways and crashed to the snow. Grom leaping away in time, before he was crushed along with the animals. Nina couldn't see any animals. Ilya's head was bare. He was lifting the axe again and again to the pens by the shed. *Please stop!* Where were the animals? The cages seemed to be empty. He had lost his mind completely. Let the animals go.

Nina gave up shouting. She couldn't do anything but go inside and bolt the door and pick up the phone. *Thank God*, she said when she heard the dial tone. But her father didn't answer. She remembered he was in another city, delivering a celebrity's baby. She phoned Father Giorgi. *Father, will you come?*

Nina saved the bread from burning and sat at the table and listened to the axe's bucketing blows. She cried. Sobbed until she was dribbling slime and tears over the skewed jigsaw puzzle that would have been sky and a girl from long ago embroidering in a garden at a table. A bowl in its centre filled with gooseberries and red apples. She had seen the red in the puzzle box and was pleased by the flecks of it among the green and blue and brown, was looking forward to the uncomplicatedness of building the fruit. She scooped up the top edge and broke the puzzle with her thumb and finger into its single pieces. Her breath twirled a long black hair over the tablecloth and she wondered whose it was. She hoped her uncle would keep on with his destroying the farm so he wouldn't start on the house. There was only that to hope for.

The priest came. She and Father Giorgi walked over the slush and the splintered pens. Nina saw sabres twirling in a row of cages that had been spared Ilya's axe. They found Ilya on the gym mats in the shed, curled like a child and shaking. His ears burnt with cold. His face covered in snot. Father Giorgi put his hands on him. *Let me hear your confession, friend.*

Ilya's voice was as stammering as his son's once was. *This is how it happened, terrible things. The witch, I killed her. And my son.*

And Nina believed what he told them when she saw the blood on her uncle's sleeves. She hit him hard then with his fists. He let her, and the priest did.

*This is the evil of the Black Faith,* Father Giorgi said. *No good ever comes by way of the shamans.*

Nina went weeping into the house.

She hardly remembered finding the police commissioner's number in Ilya's book and phoning him, but Yozhin helped the priest bring Ilya up to the house and they rolled the Empire chair on its castors and sat him in it and gave him vodka. Ilya was blubbing and speaking gibberish. Nina put her mouth to his ear and whispered. *Where is Yuri's baby?* He couldn't answer her and Nina realised, even if he had his faculties, he would have no idea what she was talking about.

## Fire

She went along the road to the mine and left the bike on the road and cut back through the forest on the trail to the witch's hut. She didn't want to go in but she heard the baby crying so she stepped over the blood on the snow and through the broken doorway. She pulled the blanket off the window but couldn't make any more daylight come through the dirty panes. Where was Yuri? Her eyes adjusted and in the murk she saw Lilia lying on the floor. A lake of blood floating her. Nina retched at the sight. The smell. She flipped a floor rug over the blood and stepped around the witch's slick without her shoes touching it. It was just as well the men were coming to burn this.

The baby was wrapped and wedged between the bed and the wall. Masks and drums and rattles with faces smirked above him. Coloured rags and bunches of herbs crowded every space. Every space stunk. She picked up Yuri's baby and put him in the sun-and-moon box and pulled him over the bloody snow to the trees. Then she went back to make sure. She searched for Yuri as if he was the size of her thumb. She looked in the dark corners and under the quilts and even inside the stove. She picked up his tiny drum with the balls on strings and put it in her pocket, the handle sticking into her ribs. Something told her to take the jar with Yuri's paper twin in it. She held it in front of her as she searched the lean-to and outside the hut. Walked all around, sinking to her knees in the drifts. Yuri was nowhere. What had Ilya done with him? Was he wandering hurt in the forest? Ilya said he was dead but where was he?

When she heard the voices of the police commissioner and the priest coming from the road, Nina pulled the box further into the forest. She put the pickle jar in the sun-and-moon box beside the baby. Ilya's voice shouted for Yuri. She stood behind a pine and watched. Father Giorgi and Yozhin were carrying petrol cans. They went into the hut. Father Giorgi reappeared at once and gagged into the snow. He stood and crossed himself. Drew another cross in the air, as wide as the witch's house. Ilya sat on the step with his head against the splintered doorframe and dug out a handful of snow and peered at it.

The priest poured petrol over the woodpile and the sacks and when the commissioner came out again with one arm across his nose and a rifle in his other hand,

saying, *God what a sight, eh, they threw the sacks into the hut. Come on, my man? What have you done with Yuri?*

Ilya spoke. *He was here. The bear's got him. He's dead. I shot him. He's dead.*

*He's not anywhere. Do you see here? Tracks.* They followed Nina's bootprints around the hut.

*No, no, a bear.*

*Christ, I don't know what's going on,* Father Giorgi said.

*Well you'd better ask Christ. Come on. Let's get this out the way and then we'll worry about the shaman. The whole family's mad as meat-axes.*

The commissioner took a deep breath and went back inside the hut and came out with two bottles of vodka and a handful of coloured rags. Nina knew the shamans put their guardian spirits into strips of cloth. *Was she mad?* The men spiralled the rags around firewood branches and the priest shook the remains of the petrol onto them. The commissioner flicked his lighter and the men tossed the lit torches in through the doorway.

A yellow flash. The small window glared. There was a whumping sound as the petrol caught. The hut was completely alight in seconds. Yuri's baby cried from inside the sun-and-moon box. Nina forgot for a moment his mother was inside the hut, the fire was so engulfing and immense. Then she imagined the witch's face shrivelling. The clotting lake bubbling around her ribcage. Her mismatched jaws and teeth an open trap. White smoke swept like a great skirt along the snow and a gush of grey was taken by the breeze over the pine forest as the roof carpets smouldered and bowed. Snow slid off the roof like slabs of icing from a hot cake. A crash as the icing buckled and caved the flimsy lean-to roof, the iron sheets smashing onto the bath and the stacked wood. *Whoa!* the men said together. Father Giorgi and Yozhin grabbed hold of Ilya's coat and they backed him towards Nina's hiding place. At the rim of the clearing, the men stopped and folded their arms. A boot each on Ilya's petrol cans. Nina could feel her cheeks tautening. The men were close enough that she could smell the fuel on their hands. See her uncle's rifle slung on Yozhin's shoulder. Lit straws flew up with the hot air. She thought she could make out shapes in the fire, animals conjured by the heat. Deer and marten and cats. A

fish. The flames contorting them. The heat-haze filled with insects and birds. A volley of bees spiralling out of the black rafters.

And the noise of the burning wood was a man hacking at cages with an axe. A meat-axe. Or another man, just as mad, drumming himself into frenzy. Nina tapped on the tiny drum through her jacket and a voice in her head said, *He's all right, I've got him.* Who had who? God? Perhaps she was mad. She shuddered and opened the lid of the sun-and-moon box a crack and slipped the drum in beside the baby who had worn himself to sleep.

The fire turned the hut into an x-ray, just the frame showing darkly, the walls already eaten up. Flames danced on petrol and on the witch's blood and threatened to leap across to the trees. The roof fell inwards then. With a rush of sparks, the latticed frame fell too, the stovepipe tipping and the fire collapsing beneath the gusting smoke before it took hold again. Flames went searching as high as the vanished roof. The men grinned. They watched, all of them, bewitched as the fire licked clean the crimes of Nina's uncle.

From the other side of the forest, where the sun was brightening, men came shouting. Mine workers burst into the clearing. Two petrol cans flew past Nina. Two vodka bottles. The commissioner and the priest had stayed too long, she knew. She saw Yozhin take out his notebook.

*For godsake, your rosary,* he said to his friend.

Father Giorgi knelt on the snow and began to pray. Ilya went down next to him, like a child.

Nina put her fingers in the cut-out shape of a moon. Dragged the box over the flattened snow towards the motorbike but she saw she had gone the wrong way when she found herself up against the Mother Pine. The fire-glow reached into the forest and shone on the twin trunks of the strange, draped tree. Underneath it, her beginning and Yuri's were buried. She sat on the box, breathing hard. She couldn't work out what seemed wrong. Then she saw. The other trees had snow frosting their branches. Snow packed into their joints. The Mother Pine had none. The box jostled under her. She heard the blue-cloth spirits whispering the prayers and blessings that composed them. 'Let me be safe on this road.' 'Bless my wife's confinement.' 'Give my father new hips.' 'If I win

the lottery, the church will have half.' Small, fetid spirits that had flown from the rags in the witch's hovel knocked themselves against the Mother Pine but they couldn't get in. A wolverine and a marten ran off together. A skylark turned to light as it flicked above Nina. An omul fish writhed in the Pine's tresses and then swam madly away through the trees. A deer rapped the trunk with its horns but took fright when Nina lifted her hand. And then, a bee, bringing with it a spark, buzzed and hovered and landed on a pile of cloths high in the Pine. Set the needles alight with its wings. A blue smoulder. Nina crossed herself and raised the lid of the sun-and-moon box. Perhaps there was magic in her, she thought. The burning bee spirit flew past her and into the baby's mouth. She lifted the baby out and ran with him in the direction of the road, the Mother Pine cracking and blazing behind her. She only looked back once as she heard glass shattering and a shotgun cartridge explode, the blue-cloth spirits losing their flimsy grip. The sun-and-moon box was full of fire.

## **Bath**

The baby was bound tightly in a towel, its red face ugly with crying. Nina laid it on Ilya's armchair and unwrapped it. Its crying was quieter now, just a done-for bleating. Under the towel was a layer of red felt. Sodden. Nina coughed and peeled it back and there was her cousin's naked baby. No name that she knew of. Her cousin's son. Him. He.

He smelled worse than a fitch, his pleated neck grimy and the stump of his navel infected and his groin raw from urine. He had been alive not quite a month and he was filthy. She stood and looked at his little puckered parts that were so foreign to her.

A red thread was tied around his wrist. Nina knew the witch had braided it and knotted it there as every mother had done for their children before her. For luck. Nina wondered how many red bracelets her own mother had made. All of them lost now, snapped in the forest or the knots worried apart at school or lying in bed at night.

*Lucky boy*, she said aloud. *What am I supposed to do with you?* She wanted the baby's father. She would let him touch her. Would. If he walked through the door now



and she could hand his baby to him she would hug him and kiss his big neck. Breathe him in. Nina rewrapped the fussing baby and lifted him up. Put her nose on his cheek. She couldn't smell his father at all.

She took the coaster off the milk jug and dipped her finger in the milk and slipped the tip of it into the baby's mouth. His little breath caught and shuddered and sighed and he latched on. She couldn't believe the suction of his tongue and lips. His hard gums. Like a fish's mouth against the joint of her finger. Nina pulled away from him and saw the blood pooled blue under her fingernail.

On the dish rack she found a clean teaspoon and even with her arms full of baby, she managed to bend the spoon up into a ladle and dip it into the milk jug. She was able to feed him this way. Stand with her back against the sinktop, ladling, his tongue working at the bowl of the spoon. Enough to keep a little fishboy alive at least. She almost smiled at the easiness of it.

She put him in the crease of Ilya's armchair. He began to cry again as she stoked the stove and boiled water. The men would be back soon, smelling of petrol and smoke and pleased with themselves. She fetched a new bar of soap and a washcloth and her towel and made a bath in the sink. Set herself these small tasks to portion out her thinking. Keep her mind on the measure of them. Soap, water, bathe the baby.

She gripped one slippery arm and held him so he wouldn't go under, his small head resting on her wrist. He floated in the warm water. The crying let go of him at last.

*Hello*, she said. She bobbed him and smoothed him, running her hand over his pale nipples, his bulbous stomach and between his legs, cupping for a second in her hand the purple sac that seemed too large and crude for a tiny boy. It wasn't so bad to touch him there. His seam and the sluggish floating skin.

Nina took a knife from the dishrack. She put the point of it on the baby's wrist. Snapped the red bracelet and tossed it onto the draining board. Her elbow caught the bar of soap and it fell and went spinning, dry, across the wooden floor. Disappeared between the flour sack and the cans of vegetables. *Devil take you*, she said.

She remembered the poem her uncle had written when he'd heard the story of Diyed's ancestors.

She soaked the washcloth and wiped the dirt out of the baby's neck folds and the nub of his navel. The baby lay looking up at her, his grey eyes quite focussed on hers now. Old eyes, she thought then. Someone else's eyes. She let him absorb the water. Nina thought of the witch's bath with its claw feet standing in fire. Lilia lying with her long knees jabbed out of the water, the baby on her spotless, white chest. And Yuri looking at Lilia and the baby as if he had everything he wanted. Nina sunk her arm into the sink. The baby's face slid beneath the surface. No struggle. He just looked up at her from under the water, his lips tight together, a fish in a ripple. She felt all his tiny muscles untie. Calming. Calm. Her arm on the lump of the plug. He was lying there so easily. Inside the water. Captured. The kettle shushed on the stove. Nina stared at the clinging fingers - *were they hers?* - pressed against his arm like sprats. Minute bubbles swam out of the baby's nostrils and plucked at the surface. The water cooled but still he lay there, still, with the breath going out of his blood. His eyes watching her, wondering. Serene. She remembered, from a fairy tale, that a witch's baby wouldn't drown.

He only began to squirm when Nina lifted his head back into the air. She fumbled him out of the sink. His mouth was small and gasping in the warm kitchen and she knew her cousin's baby, who had been born in a bathtub, had a fish spirit in him.

Nina looked into the baby's old eyes. *I can't keep you.* The baby poked out the tip of his tongue.

She carried him to the towel and dried him. His scrawny stiffening arms. His mottled legs. She pulled off his soft hangnails. His toes perfect like garlic pearls. She dried his ears and felt under his fine black hair the pulsing place on his scalp. Stroked a finger down his neck but there was no hint of a gill. No slice or flap. Silliness. *Silly girl.*

She folded a good table napkin between his legs. Then she tore two corners out of a plastic bag and fed his feet through the holes and tucked the bag around the napkin. She dressed him in her wool vest. Wrapped him in Babka's shawl. She walked around the table with him bundled warm and crinkling against her and rocked her chest forward and back. She would go with Ross now. She wasn't afraid. She saw it was him, really. The one she wanted touching her. She would let him. Now she could picture herself doing

it. Smoothing her hands over his body. Forward and back. She soothed the baby and herself. The scent of his great-grandmother was on him and he fell asleep.

When the baby was lying in Ilya's armchair, she threw out his old wrappings and went to drain the sink. *They'll want to wash their hands*, she thought, so she left the water. She found the soap and brushed the grit off it. She ate a piece of cheese and drank the milk left in the jug, her lip pursed on the spout. Everything was still. A needle of light shone at the edge of the shutter and Nina opened it and saw that the sun had dragged itself out of the forest and along the border of the sky. The smoke was there, a shroud over the trees. Her uncle had gone berserk and killed Yuri and the witch. Had carried Yuri away and hidden him somewhere in the snow. Perhaps Ilya would never remember where he'd left his son's body. And the sun had kept climbing despite all this. To spite it. There wasn't anything a silly girl could do.

Nina looked out over the porch to the smashed cages. The farm looked desolate. At another edge of the forest, the witch's hovel was smouldering. Already ash. Nina thought of Ilya's burnt sun-and-moon box. His book of poems ash, too. The poem about the Madonna and the guns and the church on fire and the dead children with their skeleton wrists and the red threads that had never been lucky for any children ever at all. She sat down on the floor and wept. When she was aware again of the cold, Nina got up and put a log in the stove. She went into her bedroom and opened drawers. Everything she owned, she folded and fitted into her uncle's suitcase. She unpinned his competition badges from the lid pocket and threw them under the bed. Pushed the suitcase after them. Then she buttoned up the December coat and got down a quilt from the cupboard shelf. She picked up the baby and went out.

## Fur

Nina drove on from the mine and stopped the bike where the road finished. Yozhin the Commissioner's house stood near the edge of the Old Man at the end of a private bay. The house was a converted dacha his wife's parents had owned. Klara's family had come each summer from the west to holiday by the Sacred Sea. Nina knew the commissioner had spied on Klara. Babka had told her Yozhin was besotted. How he had stalked and teased and mollycoddled the little rich girl for three summers. Klara was fourteen, then fifteen, then sixteen. The new commissioner twenty years older than that.

It was his presents she fell in love with, Babka told Nina. The jewels and furs. Yozhin had come to Ilya and demanded the finest silver fox skins. Ordered the furrier to make them into a long coat. With a hem of tails. Klara wore the coat all through the summer heat. Swished along the shore with a quartz ring on one finger. A pearl ring on another. The fox tails flicking up shingle as she paraded along the shore. At the end of that summer, she told her family she wouldn't be going home with them. When she married Yozhin, Klara's family cut her off. They never came back to the summer house and Yozhin eventually requisitioned it. Added rooms and a second storey. And every year, a new coat or two for his lovely wife. The choicest of Ilya's furs.

Nina checked the baby was still breathing in the sidecar. Took him from under the quilt she had tucked over him.

She walked with him in her arms along the shovelled path to the door. Rang the bell. The house was huge and quiet. All the shutters shut. It took a full minute before Klara came to the door. She was wearing a thin, cream dressing-gown and fur slippers. Her eyelids were puffy and her blonde hair lank and tangled from sleep.

*Excuse me, madam.*

*It's Nina, isn't it?*

*Yes. You taught me English.*

*You were very good. My best student.*

*Thank you. You were a very good teacher. I still have my dictionary.*

*Come out of the cold.*

In the entranceway, Nina took off her gloves and boots. There were radiators on the walls. A steep staircase in front of them going up to a mezzanine floor. Doors off it. Klara led her past the staircase into a kitchen. Stone countertops, a modern stove and a white refrigerator. The hum of a generator.

*Sit, please.*

She yawned and waved Nina towards a leather-covered booth that curved around a square table. Nina sat down on the padded bench. Propped the baby against her shoulder. He began to fuss again.

*I'll make tea.* Klara pushed a button on an electric kettle and it made a sound like shingle turning. Klara put two glasses on the counter. *So. You have a baby now.*

*Oh no, he's not mine.*

Nina knew this fact: the commissioner's wife was desperate to have a baby.

*She can conceive all right,* Nina's father had said. *Just not hold on to them.* Alexei attended her miscarriages. Two a year for three years. Then three this last year. Nina's favourite teacher was no longer teaching. Conceiving had worn her out. Alexei had sighed. *I wish she would give up trying. It's killing her. That husband.*

Nina mumbled, shy in front of her teacher. *He's my cousin's baby, madam. Yuri's. The shaman. I think you know him. He's been here before.*

Klara spooned tea leaves into a pot. *No. I don't think so.*

A fib. Yuri had told Nina he visited the house while Klara's husband was at work. Yozhin didn't know his wife called up the shaman to rid her of her headaches. Begged him to magic her a baby. Wave smoke over her inhospitable womb. Perhaps Yuri's magic had worked at last. In a way too terrible to think about. Nina jiggled the bundle over her shoulder as she had seen mothers do. Each time his wife lost a baby, people said, the commissioner gave Klara the consolation of a fresh fur coat. Nina knew it was true. Ilya grumbled when Alexei delivered the news of the latest miscarriage. The commissioner's wife was making him poor.

*Can I see him?* Klara came over to Nina and shifted the shawl away from the baby's face. *What's his name? Do you need to see my husband?* She stroked the baby's cold-flushed cheek and he turned his mouth towards her finger.

*It's you I want to see, madam. I wonder if you will take the baby.*

*Excuse me?*

*His father is dead. And his mother. Your husband is burning the hut where their bodies lie. Half a fib. Only one body burning.*

*My husband?* Nina saw Klara's face in the glow of the kitchen light, the bruised half-moons under her eyes. *Yuri is dead?*

*They'll kill this baby if they find out he's the witch's.*

*The witch. Poor woman.* Nina shuffled further into the booth and laid the baby on the bench beside her. The baby moved his mouth as if he was going to speak. Klara regarded his face. Her eyes filled with tears. *Who killed Yuri? He was such a good man. Very kind.*

*My uncle shot them. It's a mess.* Nina began to cry, too. Wept, at the commissioner's breakfast table. *Your husband came, madam, with the priest, and told Ilya they'd do it. Help him. Burn the witch's house. Yozhin will write a report - say they were on drugs. Say it was an accident. A fire while they were asleep.* Nina caught her spasming breath in the baby's shawl. *He'll write: 'No evidence of foul play.' But they weren't on drugs and they weren't asleep.*

Klara put her hand on Nina's hair. *I heard my husband take the call this morning. Your voice.* Klara lifted the baby and clasped him with his head on her collar bone. She wrapped the lapels of her dressing-gown around him. Shushed him. *It's all right, little orphan boy.*

*I got there before them.* Nina was aware of her voice, high and trembling. *The witch was bleeding everywhere. The baby would be burned too. I don't know where Yuri is.*

Klara wasn't listening. She was smitten with the baby's face. *My god. Did you see? He has Yuri's eyes.*

*Yes.*

*What will I say to Yozhin? You don't have any idea what he's like.* She clucked at the baby and tucked his head into her dressing-gown. Nina saw his black hair against the toffee skin of Klara's neck. She saw her teacher's hands knew how to hold him. It would be all right.

Klara had forgotten the tea. She was gently dancing the baby around the kitchen. Nina wiped her eyes on her sleeve. She was the instructor now. *We'll write a note. Pretend it's from the baby's mother. You can say he was left on your doorstep.*

Klara brought a pencil and an exercise book from a drawer and Nina tore out a page and wrote:

*Please care for my baby. I know you are blessed with loving hearts and will raise him in your good home. His name is Arlitz. Thank you.*

Nina made the words slanting so there would be no trace of her own hand.

Arlitz.

She had no idea where that name had come from. She folded the note in half on the table. Wrote *The Commissioner*. Shuffled along the booth and got up.

*That looks fine, Nina.*

*He's yours now. Thank you for having him. I'll go. Your husband will be coming back. My uncle, too.* She kissed her two fingers and touched them to Arlitz' forehead because she thought it was the right thing to do.

*Wait. Come with me.*

The commissioner's wife carried Arlitz up the staircase and Nina followed. Around the balustrade to the end of the balcony. Klara took, from a corner, a stick with a brass crook. Reached up and snagged a rope handle on the ceiling and pulled. A trapdoor opened and a metal ladder unfolded from it.

*Come up,* Klara said.

She climbed the ladder one-handed and Nina climbed behind her, watching the rungs roll under the hem of Klara's dressing-gown. In a moment, they were through the trap of the ceiling and crouching under the roof. Nina took a breath. Sunshine came through a narrow skylight. Dust motes whirled in the shaft. The attic was made of fur.

*Well?* Klara giggled.

Fur. All manner of fur. Mink and fitch and sable. All colours. All breeds. Fox and rabbit and squirrel and hare. Coats, wraps, throws. Pelts. Stapled to the ceiling. Billowing from the rafters and walls. Swarming above them, and nailed under their feet. Blacks and silvers and browns. Each fine hair shifting with the draft of their breaths.

Nina sat and ran her hand against the grain of a mink's back. Snuck her fingertips into the yellow underwool. She and Klara and the baby were inside a living animal that had been turned inside out.

*It's strange. Something so dead can seem so alive.*

*Exactly,* said Klara. *I knew you'd understand.*

Arlitz cried. Nina's skin prickled.

Klara pulled the ladder back into the ceiling so they were trapped in the cave of fur. *Yozhin won't adopt, you see. I asked him. He's always said he won't raise another man's child.*

Arlitz, as if he'd understood, became a siren.

*WE'LL STAY UP HERE. WE WON'T COME DOWN. UNTIL HE AGREES.* She kissed the baby's forehead. *He'll beg and beg me. Are you hungry, little tomato?*

Klara sat on the dark head of a sable and undid the sash of her dressing-gown. Dropped the sleeve from her shoulder. Nina didn't look away from her teacher's small, toffee-coloured breast. Tiny white scars flicked over it, like herrings. The baby searching and hiccupping and Klara guiding him to her. His fish-mouth groping and finally pressing in place, stretched over the dark circle. Engulfing it. Klara murmured. *I can make the milk come. He'll make it come.*

Nina didn't know how they would. How that would happen. But she was suddenly envious. Of Klara. Of the baby's desire. Klara's hard gasp as the baby drew at her. Nina had never felt like this. Alive. A desire in her stomach and chest. The heat was sumptuous. Like a spell. She wanted to roll around in the animal's cavity and stir herself into its fur. Bury herself, her cheeks and thighs and toes, melt through the length of its down and lie with her skin pressed hard against the hide, her fingers thrust through its ribcage to its satin outlining. The wanting frightened her. Carnal, she thought the word was. Erotic. The discomfort of knowing she wanted to take that plushness into her mouth. Suffocate. She tried to make her breath quieten.

Klara had reached out and gripped Nina's thigh. She sighed and tipped her head back and gazed into the dusty sunlight, into the deluge of fur.



Nina looked away from the baby's taut mouth and up at Klara's face, radiant with the shaft of light on it. That blissful, distant expression Nina had seen before. Halfway between ecstasy and sorrow.

And then Nina thought of the coats and shuddered. At least nine of them were an account of a baby who'd never lived. Splayed and puzzled together. Arms outstretched. The attic room wasn't beautiful; it was grotesque. A testimony to Klara's failure and sorrow. Nina thought of her uncle's animals, doomed because of their beauty. She thought of her cousin who would never live the rest of his splendid life. And she thought of her life. The life that was one story yesterday and a different story today. She had woken up so long ago. If she could only curl up with the baby, on Klara's lap. Fall asleep in this bizarre room. Wake in a while and find she'd been dreaming.

She listened to the baby's tongue guzzling at Klara's emptiness. Klara was rocking gently. The animals slipping over the roof. Nina slid away from Klara's hand. She took off her grandmother's coat and laid it over Arlitz and his new mother. Then she pushed the ladder through the hatch and climbed down into the cool air.

## Wolf

The priest was coming through the farm gate in his car.

*He's all right, Nina, said Father Giorgi. We've tied up some ends. He'll need watching.*

*I saw the smoke.*

*Yes, well, a couple of trees went up also. Thank God for the snow. And the miners. They threw it on the branches. The shamans' tree wouldn't stop burning. There could be trouble with the Americans. When is your father back?*

*Tonight, tomorrow, I'm not sure.*

*Well, Ilya could do with something to knock him out. Restless. Give him another drink. I'll pray for you, Nina.*

*Thank you Father.*

Nina drove into the destroyed yard. Grom barked to her. She went into the shed and scraped a coating of old feed out of the mixer into a bucket. Slopped portions of the muck on top of the remaining cages. On the porch, she let Grom lick her glove. She took a breath and let herself into the house. Ilya was in his armchair, the vodka bottle almost empty on his lap. He was pulling out his hair. She took the bottle from him and swilled the dregs.

*Thank God Babka's not here to see it, she said. What have you done with Yuri? Is he buried?*

But Ilya couldn't answer her.

Nina woke gasping from a quick dream of a huge fur creature wrapping its paws over her head. She jerked her arm up and pulled the quilt off her face. Woke again with the witch lying on the hovel floor, burning. And again, Yuri strolling alongside her through a corridor of trees, coming out together at the edge of the water, diving into the Old Man and swimming out. There was no rest from the dead in her dreams. Yuri's guardian fish had swum into Arlitz now, passed to his son who couldn't drown. And Yuri had become the wolf. Or the wolf was him. Now he'd be hunted and alone.

She lay, in her clothes still. Wound the quilt around her, only her nose and mouth clear, and she wept for her cousin. But mostly for herself. Grief overwhelmed her, its

strange gravity pressing her into the mattress. Surely she should have been made lighter by the exact weight of Yuri's existence? Perhaps all the heaviness of him rested separately in her heart. She got up, sighing. The clock showed three am, the house silent. Ilya's boots and socks and coat strewn beside his chair. Nina flicked the porch light and opened the door. Grom whined and she followed his gaze to the sky over the trees, a belt of churning lights. Not fire, but blue, and yellow and green flames. The iridescence that sometimes came down from the Arctic, a flickering film. Spirits, she thought. Those are the spirits of the Mother Pine. The voice spoke to her. The one she had heard before, in the forest. *It's all right. I have him. He's safe.* The lights shimmered, ribbons of colour breaking away and flicking outwards. The belt vanishing piece by piece until only the moon remained, a glinting buckle in the pine branches. Grom huffed and pawed beside her. She unhooked his chain and let him inside. Picked up his bowl and smacked it on the step to dislodge a frozen cube of meat. Then Nina saw the shape of a wolf in the yard. It was looking straight at her, or she imagined it was. She called out: *There you are. It's all right. I've got him. He's safe.* And the wolf was real because it swung its head, *his* head, and bowed, leapt onto a cage that had fallen against the end of the shed. Jumped onto the shed roof as the cage slid and fell. Disappeared over the high fence.

## Ilya

Nina changed into her nightdress and got into bed again. Ilya's bedroom door opened and she heard the strain of a chair on the floor and the clink of bottles. She fell asleep and dreamed of the wolf. Klara riding on his back. She half woke when Grom jumped onto the bed. He was trying to get under the quilt. The dog pressed against her back, pulled her nightdress with his teeth. She shrugged him off. Grom put his arms around her. She tried to pull away but the arms pinned her. Then the sugary smell of drink and the pitiful sound of a grown man trying to swallow his sobbing.

Her uncle said, *I can't, Nina, help me.*

*Get away. Get out of my bed.*

But her uncle had been turned into someone else by grief, the bulk of him oddly resting against her.

*What will we do?* he cried.

She tried to get up but he held her and she began to cry, too. She didn't know. And in the dark she found herself turning to him, holding Ilya's unshaven face as he shook. She put her arm over him and they held each other, absorbing what comfort they could from bodies that were acquainted but unfamiliar. Accustomed to each other's distance. Nina put her chin into Ilya's breastbone and he pulled the quilt over them and she lay in the sharp sweetness of his breath, her head in his chest hair and his whiskers pricking her forehead and he kissed her hair. Then he was kissing her face, his wet cheeks on hers, and she let him. Some need in her woken by sorrow tied with that wanting she'd had in the fur room. Her heart needing to share its weight, the inordinate heaviness of Yuri's death, and her body with it. Ilya's hands went from her hips to his pants' buttons and she was lifting her nightdress, giving him permission. He was hard against her stomach and she opened her legs to him. She would use Ilya, make him scour out her cousin and the witch dead in the dirt.

The sudden pain was a relief, an obliteration she wanted and she galloped with it, catching her tongue in her back teeth. It felt as if her uncle was removing her insides with a blade and she let his hands knead over her, turned her mind to a belt of light hung between trees. Ilya pushing her, on top of her now, moaning with distress and lust and

madness as if he would ride on forever. For a moment she believed her anguish was gone, it had been driven out of her heart and lost in the ache between her legs and she had been blessed with forgetting. But now it swam back into her veins as he finished. Her uncle sliding away and rolling onto his stomach with his back to her. They lay stunned and panting.

*Forgive us, she whispered. We don't know what we're doing.*

*It's not my fault, Ilya said. I've gone mad.*

Some time before dawn, she felt Ilya staring at her in the dark. He stood and buttoned his pants and went out. Nina thought, when it's light, I'll go to Ross and say, take me, I'll go with you to your country. Take me away from here.

She didn't know then that her son, Valek, was begun.

## **PART THREE**

### **FURRY MOYRA**

## Love

I wake on the floor beside my bed, my head against the syrup-coloured wall, the curtain still. Falling didn't wake me, a bad dream did. I've imagined everything and know nothing. I feel as if I haven't slept at all. Was it only yesterday I was carrying a deer back to Furry Moyra? How many days ago had I jumped from the bridge and failed to die?

I'm used to lying on the floor. When you'd rolled off me, this is what I'd do. I'd crawl under the bed and lie with my spine pressed to the lamp plug and begin the ritual of soothing myself. I'd kiss my shoulders and arms, expelling my warm breath, kiss my thighs and feet. I'd put my lips on all my skin I could reach. This was a gentle passion I played out upon myself, stepping away from my thinking mind and feeling with all my senses that someone was enraptured by me, adored me. My lips, I imagined, were yours, affectionate and benevolent and thankful, although I knew you were incapable of such feelings for me. I was often sorry for you, sorry for the man who would never know compassion and could only manufacture his bliss through, well, lust. There was irony in the imagining of a cold-blooded narcissist's mouth caressing my skin but I continued quietly, passionately, secretly redeeming you through this deliquescence, this loving embellishment of my body. I'd kiss my fingertips and place them on my ribs where the urologist had adorned me. I understood I was no more than a dog licking my wounds, a mother comforting her disappointed child but, because you didn't want the heart I had lost to you, and because I must endure, I would fool my heart into believing it was beloved. And when I was finished, I would lie on the floorboards and say to the man on the bed above me, I love you.

## Voice

You're the best listener. You opened your eyes and looked at me. Remember, Arlitz, you are not just in an empty space, you are in a sacred time, you come and go. You are safe and among friends. You can feel all your feelings, see all you are seeing, hear all you are hearing. You are never alone because I am with you. And you with me.

I'm lucky to be here. With you. In this country. The commissioner said if we didn't take Ilya off his hands, he would not authorise my passport. Ross agreed to bring him with us. In two months we were flying over Diyed's bones. Something reached through the sky and picked me up but I was not afraid. Soon, we looked down on islands that had been pulled out of the earth and blue glass melted around them, I thought, I will start my life. I will be happy here. But I discovered I was pregnant. Not Ross' baby. It was impossible. He left me. Us. I couldn't blame him. Ilya and I stayed together. Uncle and niece, husband and wife, what difference does it make? What choice did we have? We tried to heal. We got jobs coaching gymnastics. Years later, a family tragedy. Our son, blinded. I left Ilya. I trained to be a nurse. Here I am. Massaging your hands. Telling you this nonsense as if a boy wants to hear it. Your grandfather is saving you. He is a good man. And for a while, I admit, Ilya saved me. From everything but memory. This is how scars are. A whole life away, there is a world where fish are see-through and mink roam caged. There is a boy who is a wolf and a lake that is an Old Man. We caught the fish and trapped the mink and wounded the boy. There is a girl who loved an old woman who pulled magic from the dirt. Everything was transparent. The girl with the cold under her skin could not save the boy because she had no magic in her. At the end, there is only this woman. I humbly bear my life.



## Skin

I get up and Harvey is at the kitchen counter, drinking tea.

Where's Hunapo? I say.

In the barn. Miriam is staying in bed for the day. Bad dream.

Me too.

Oh?

Someone was trying to drown me and then I was in the stomach of an animal and there was snow and something burning. Also I was being carried through a forest and a bee flew into my mouth.

Sounds vivid. A bee?

There was a wolf in it, too. I've dreamed of wolves all my life. Somebody told me my birth father had a wolf spirit. Harvey? Am I the only one here?

What do you mean?

Are you real? Can I touch you?

Of course.

I touched Hunapo. Honey. She was real. Miriam. I've helped lift Ilya to his rings. I held him. They don't interact.

No?

None of them talk to each other. Not really. They all talk to me but I've never seen one of them direct a question at another. So the only thing that makes sense is too weird.

Which is?

That this is all my imagination. A dream. Is this my dream? Am *I* a dream?

Do you think you are?

I'm not a dream. I helped Miriam gut a deer. I smelt it. You can't make that up.

Harvey looks worried, as if things aren't going according to plan. You didn't request a pass, Arlitz. It's a rule.

There wasn't time.

We can't have you leaping over the fences and going bush. Anything could happen.

Venison happened, I say.

Ilya comes through the doorway from the hall. He doesn't say anything, just takes a bag of salt from the pantry. Finds a filleting knife in the drawer and tests it with his thumb. I follow him to the barn. The humming a hard static as I pass the hole.

Above the station wagon, the deer is hanging from its neck by a rope. Ilya strung it up last night, its ribcage open, the carcass small under the high roof, like a failed gymnast, I can't help thinking. Hanging too close to the truth of Ilya's father.

Morning, I say. To Hunapo, who is cross-legged on the concrete, her bone box lid becoming a story. Vines and waves. A lizard's head. Small whorls and koru littering her feet. Where are her baby's bones? Ilya's coffin is almost finished, decorated and perfect next to Miriam's mess of half-finished basket. I wish I could kiss you is what I want to say to Hunapo. Something happened to me, up there in the forest.

I didn't tell you I have a coffin now! Ilya knocked it together in an afternoon. A cabinet, the shape of a fridge carton. I've decided to be buried sitting up, like Honey's koro. Ilya cut a round window in the side, a peephole, so I can go to the afterlife with a view. If I die in Furry Moyra, they'll truss my knees to my chest and oil me and put chicken feathers in my hair, as requested.

There's a paintbrush and a tin of bright red acrylic on the floor that I guess is for me. I get a screwdriver and prise off the lid and look around for a stirring stick. I ask Ilya, Do you think killing an animal gives you some kind of power? I mean killing something defenceless that never did you any harm? Like the noble savage. You know?

The killing is not noble but it's okay. When I killed the fur, I knew of the suffering but it was my livelihood so I could not get torn up with dismay. You raise the animal to martyr so the weight of its death will not bow you down.

Ilya slices off the deer's forelegs and tosses them on the floor. Then he cuts through the hair under the noose. He hands me the knife and takes vice-grips out of the toolbox and grabs the skin on the deer's neck and pulls down, past the meat of its shoulders, a blanket of tallowed skin coming off like a shroud. He grunts and pulls and I give him back the knife to sever the back legs and tailbone. The Siberian is deft. The skin crumples on the floor in less than two minutes, the deer converted to meat. Ilya spreads out the hide gutside up like a mat. He crouches to cut the fat off.

I examine the sketches on his coffin. Are these pictures about you? I say.

My life. My mother country.

The lid and sides are covered with overlapping pencil-drawings of trees and wolves and bears. And animals that I guess are sable and mink. And people. The guy's life is a pageant.

There's a wolf in my dreams, I say.

Have you seen a real one?

No.

I have touched one.

I guess that's why you can draw them so well I say. I'd like to hear about your first son. I don't tell Ilya I already have a fair idea what happened to him.

It's hard for me to suffer that story, he says. But. I have already written it. A letter to Yuri that may explain why a person turns out like me.

He puts down the knife and wipes his hands on his handkerchief. Then he shifts the coffin lid and reaches inside. He sorts through a stack of paper as thick as a book. His face looks more torn-up than usual.

Yes. That night, I hadn't slept, or something woke me. I didn't know which. Seven a.m. It would be two hours at least before the sun rose. Then nine hours of dim day between that and another sundown. Winter is like that in my country. Here it is. The letter I address to my first son who will never learn English. But. I write it also to myself.

Hunapo has her back to the strung carcass. She taps her chisel and I stir my paint with a cane stake and I watch her face to see if she's listening to Ilya.

## Yuri

Killing can take a lot of the human out of you. Or do I mean the humanity? Perhaps in my adopted country, I can claim the bruises I have left on boys' biceps, the memory I gave their muscles to move their bodies over the apparatus. Blood under the skin. This could be the signature I leave on your half-brother, Valek, who was born in this country and who you will never know you. The name I left on everything. Looking back, which is something I do a lot at my age, I have to say, if there is anything I left behind in my own labours it is blood. Never my own. This is the story of your blood, Yuri.

I got up and turned on the kitchen light, fed a log into the stove, poked the embers to start it. Stood at the dining table and tried to fit a piece into Nina's jigsaw puzzle. I gave up. My fingers were cold and my eyes couldn't focus under the weak bulb and anyhow I didn't see the point in it.

I put on my coat and poured a glass of vodka and a glass of milk. Pulled Babka's Empire chair from under the tablecloth. The chair was how I remembered your Babka. Polished birch. Gilded. Two sculpted angels holding the armrests on their wings. Flown down through seven generations. I sat without putting my full weight on it and thought about the story of Babka's ancestor. How she had been wealthy enough to own such a chair. How she had left her children in the city and come to live at the edge of the lead and silver mines with other women whose husbands had been imprisoned also. Men made to labour miserably for simple crimes - telling fortunes or practicing magic or speaking against the government. Those women braved the fiercest winters to feed their husbands. To humour them and keep them alive. The camp they set up became this village. The mines still giving up their metals day and night at the other side of the forest. The chair should have passed to Nina, of course. I ran my forefingers over the wooden feathers of the gold angels. Then I drank half a glass of the vodka to the memory of those women who loved their husbands so much.

Heat spread into my chest. The drink did nothing for my unease. I sat looking at the puzzle frame and my head began to fit the picture together: the night was quieter than I wanted. A man should worry when things are too quiet. When there's a yard full of

creatures and when those creatures' proper waking time is darkness, quiet is wrong. No rumbling. No claws rattling on the wire. Unnatural. This is what had taken so long to come to the front of my head.

I pushed back the Empire chair and got up and went to the end of the house. I turned the knob and found the door unlocked. I looked into the dark of Nina's room. Listened to her breathe and sigh. The dog was a hump on her quilt. It whimpered and put up its head and jumped down and came to me. Nina gave a little hum but didn't wake.

I pulled on my gloves and boots and tied a trooper hat over my woollen one and went into the compound with a lantern torch and a stick. Those snow clouds that had weighed down the horizon for a week had lifted their dirty stomachs and slunk off to the east. The night was taking a breath while it could. There was a curved moon. Stars.

I thought a fox might have got in, or a wolf. But. The dog followed me between the rows of cages as I shone the light along the boxes. Sables - young ones from the last trapping - jumped away from my light. Dug themselves into the wooden corners or squirmed in circles on the wire floors. The tamer ones put their paws on the wire thinking food had come early. Swayed their heads like blind men. Their guard hairs long and silver-tipped in the light, their fur luxurious with cold. I swung the lantern beam over the yard, across the closed gates and along the side fence and over the shed and I saw what had woken me. What my worrying had known.

The big crates by the shed wall.

Oi! I said. To no one but himself and the dog. My voice came out thicker than my breath and sat in the air. The dog whined. I could see the cage doors were latched but the wire netting hung out of the frames, the squares slashed through. I cursed at the dog and stabbed the stick into the snow and ran to the shelter roof and shone the light into the compartments where the breeders were kept. The hares and foxes, the mink and fitch and sable, my pedigree pairs, all gone. My whites. The scanglows. The russet Kolinskys. The minks I'd bred and mutated to be the finest. My sapphire males and females with fur like silken gold. Worth gold. Fifty sows ready to drop their litters. And the foxes. Their whelps that winter would be blue-grey and perfect. The two black hares. Gone.

The dog ran around my legs, crazed with the overlapping scents. There were bootprints in the drift by the nursery crates. I followed the dog along a dragging of snow. A shallow, scraped trail that ran to the front of the compound. A corner of fence-iron was bent outwards. I crawled after the dog through the hole. Lifted the lantern and shone its beam over the cutting where the road would be. The road was empty. The drag marks of something heavy across it, a sack maybe, that ended at the beginning of the pines. No human shape.

*Show yourself, coward*, I said. No thief answered. The dog had gone, into the forest.

I was alone in every direction.

In the lantern's yellow light I could make out the dip of a boot toe and a pattern of paw prints running over the soft-banked snow under the black trees. Skittering prints, much smaller than a dog's.

It would have taken a person many trips. Taken a woman.

Her hideous teeth. I thought of her screaming at my gate in the autumn. *Butcher!* I thought of my animals going into the sacks. A glove in their scruff, a panic of legs and claws. Tumbling and wrapping their bodies in each other as they were dragged over the ground. The crush through the fence hole. Why hadn't I heard it? Dreamed it? The cutting of the wire. The animals geckering. I thought of the sable and mink being turned loose on the road, a streaming of pelts from the sacks, beautiful, like a rich woman's coat, before the seams tore apart and they headed for the dark trees. Did they remember at once how it was to be wild when all they had in their muscles was captivity? Perhaps wild was something instinctual. In their guts. But. They were born in cages. Their parents were. And their parents. The animals would starve before their kits were born. The forest had nothing to give them. They didn't stand a chance. My livelihood. Years of careful cultivation. Wasted. I heard in that word an echo of my father's voice. The dark pressed into my shoulders. Turned to anger in me.

*Come here*, I yelled into the pines and my voice was soft in the frozen air, pathetic, but the dog heard me and came back against all its instincts. I knelt and pushed its haunches through the broken fence and went in after it. Reached back and bent down the crook of iron over the hole. The dog trotted along beside me to the pelting shed, its nose

working the ground. Our breathing was too cold even to show at the edge of the lantern light. Ice clung to our coats. I lifted a long black hair off the cage wire and laid it on my collar. I tugged the lock on the shed door, then walked to the far fence and checked under the other shelters. There, I turned off the lantern and leaned my back against the rack of empty cages. The few leftover sables were chittering now, expecting food. I listened to their small captive noises and thought about what I would do. The dog gave a creaking yawn. Then it ran off and disappeared in the firewood stacks and came back straight away with a fitch in its mouth.

*Sit. Good. Drop.* It was a good dog. It let me have its prey and I held the skinny creature in front of the lantern and turned it over in my gloves. I couldn't see any blood on it. My shins ached in the places where they had once snapped in half. My jaw and heart and bladder and fists ached from being kept tight. It was too much. I was finished. I couldn't think of starting all this again. *Filthy drunken ugly goat bitch*, I said.

The dog looked up at me and thumped its tail.

I found the fitch's number and put it back in its cage. I looked towards the front fence. The tops of the pines. The sharp moon was setting among the stars. Like a curved blade. Or the claw of a sable. A tragedy especially and the poet reaches for a simile. A moon like the grin of a witch, I wrote. She had put her curse on my son, and now my animals. My lives.

I tied up the dog to the porch and went into the house with hardly a sound. Took off my gloves and put them against the stove. Lifted the witch's hair off my collar and laid it on the white tablecloth inside the frame of Nina's jigsaw puzzle. Stood and looked at it while I finished the vodka. Then I filled another glass to the rim, held it high. *Health and strength*. My salute silent. I didn't want Nina to wake and turn my mind away from what I was meaning to do. Although I could hardly feel a meaning in anything. Not in a salute or the shape of a poet's moon or in a loyal dog or in a yardful of fur. What matters is the thing that comes to kill you. That's what makes you sit up. What cracks your heart. I sculled the vodka and washed my mouth out with milk. I could smell my gloves steaming. Outside the shutters, the dog whined. I took the end of the loaf from the draining board and tore off a piece and held it under my nostrils. A tremor in my fingers. I chewed up the bread even though my sad fury had no taste for it. I put the heel into my

pocket for the dog. Then I went to the cupboard and pulled out a pile of coats and unclipped my rifle from the back wall.

My heart knocks a hole in my ribs as the trees thin and my light comes up against the pine. I stop numb in the snow.

I'd seen it plenty of times before when I'd veered from my trap line. The pine with two legs. Two roots. Its top grown in a bow, bowed to the ground, afflicted by its cargo of blue cloths and talismans. Feathers and bones and necklaces with amulets weighing it down. Pottery animals hanged from its indigo branches. Pieces of mirror. Shotgun cartridges. A bear skull. Jabbed onto a snapped-off branch through one eye socket. Milk in a chained metal cup, frozen. And in the triangle between the striding, blue-wrapped trunks, a sack of flour, and two packs of cigarettes. Offerings that stupid people had brought to the witch and her spirits. Travellers hoping to get out of the country alive. Blue for everlasting heaven and peace. If I had a match, I would smoke one of those cigarettes. Get some nicotine into my nerves.

The laden pine has a kind of mystic beauty though. A presence, like a woman. Submissive and accommodating. Its fringe sweeping the snow. Only, I'm feeling like I'm the submissive one. Compliant. I could be under some sort of spell the pine is casting. Me thinking about beauty when I have so much rage in my head. But I don't believe in spells. I believe in God mostly. The implacable God that tests me and finds me wanting. The God that expects justice and metes it out. I'm not sure what God thinks I've done to deserve this. I'm not sure which of my sins has caught up with me. All of them at once. I pull a blue strip from the trunk and lag it around my wrist. Some other man's prayer bound to me. Like a charm. I lean for a moment, my hand on the leg of the concubine tree. Right in front of me, a small, buck-tooth pinecone lands. I slip it into my pocket. Padding myself with talismans. *God help me*, I say.

The witch-lovers have trodden down a track and I move along it, easier now, through the trees until I come to the edge of them.

I stop in the shelter of the last pine, where I can smooth my breath and study the hut in the clearing. No chimney. Just the top of a thin metal flue sending up a thread of



smoke. The roof around the flue is thick with snow. Small icicles hanging from the shingles' edges. The hut's walls slapped together from pieces of timber and tin and cardboard and sacks and carpets. It's almost a yurt. A hovel. If it wasn't for the drifts against the walls, I don't know how the mess would stay standing. Perhaps in summer the posts of the lean-to roof over the wood stack and the tin bath, keep it braced upright. It's a mad woman's house. I am madder than her now. But oddly calm. I've gone past the edge of myself into this clearing.

My torchlight sketches across the bath, across the blanketed window. The door surprises me. Carved panels with pretty looping fretwork. A brass knob. Salvaged or stolen, I can only guess which. The jamb along the misfitted hinges stuffed with straw. For a moment I think I might have it wrong. Nothing but a black hair on my dining table to say it was the witch that stole my animals and turned them over to their deaths.

My lungs catch, tender from the frozen air. I hang the lantern torch on a branch stub. It falls onto the snow so I switch it off and leave it there. There isn't enough light to see properly - a pale cream above the trees signalling a morning not due for another hour yet at least - so I stand and load my gun in the dark from memory. Take four bullets from my coat pocket, fumbling each with my gloves to find the sharp end. I wonder how many of my stolen animals have already been food for the wolves. How many have been lucky enough to find themselves a hole for their half-tamed organs to dry up in. I remind myself of the witch screaming at my gate, when Nina was in the hospital. *Murderer! Let them go.* Demanding I release her sisters and brothers. It was the first time I'd known she could speak words. *Butcher!* I'd gone out to her with a stick. She'd bent down and clawed up a handful of dirt and eaten it in front of me. I'd wanted to wipe the dirt and contempt off her face. But. Babka stopped me.

I push the last bullet along the feed ramp of my rifle. Close the bolt and release the safety. I put the butt against my coat, point the muzzle at the hovel door and listen. The faint hum of the stove pipe above the roof. The heavy nothing sound of the snow on the slope of the shingles.

Murderer. It made me laugh. This from the woman who would kill a sheep in the town square and pull out its heart. I had left my fur agent's office one afternoon and seen the spectacle. The witch was performing for a tour bus of schoolboys who asked her for

exam passes and miraculous girlfriends before queuing to drink the vodka she was squeezing the sheep's gore into. Before their teachers came shouting out of the teashop. Before the police came and arrested her and put the sheep in the boot of the commissioner's car. I had fetched Yozhin the commissioner myself.

I know in my bones it was her.

I go towards the hut, listening. On the ground, under the window, I see what I'd thought at first was a dead dog but is only two sacks thrown there, already stiff. A pair of wire-cutters resting on them. A spark plug.

So I kick the door, and the frame gives up easily, like kindling, or a sable's neck when its time has come. The door swings inwards, straw falling on my coat from the lintel as I march into the dark, the glow from the open stove illuminating the floor that shifts under my boots. Thin rugs. The smell of smoke and mutton. I brush aside dangling cloths and sheaves of dried flowers. In a glass on a stool is a guttering candle. I can make out the shape of a palette low on the floor, an arm lifting a quilt and the witch rising from her bed, standing taller than me, her shadow flung on the ceiling and I lift the gun to my shoulder and shoot her.

The whole room fills with noise and I am half deaf when the witch's mouth opens to scream and then she's at my feet, her head on one side and a hole in the back of her knitted dress. The coals flaring briefly in the stove. I hadn't realised I'd do it that fast. No words to her, or conscience. Before I shot her.

And then, or during this, in the orange light of the room, I see that someone else is there. A man. On the witch's bed. Where he had been lying against her, sleeping, moving too as the witch sat up and the bullet went straight into her heart. And the man has risen also - I see him at the same instant as the gun's report - shouting words I don't understand or hear completely. The man is trying to get up from the palette and come at me but he can't; his knees buckle and he falls over the witch's body. Then I lever and shoot again. The crack is completely deafening but I know I haven't aimed at all, the bullet passing through the ragged wall. I have swung the muzzle away because I have recognised, as I am pulling the trigger, the man's quiet voice.

The boy's voice.

The boy sprawled at my feet, my face weeping over the witch's face, quieter than I can bear. Blood washing down the side of the boy's face into the witch's black hair.

I can't fathom I've done this now. This wrenching thing. My bullet gone through the witch and into my own son. And I'm moaning in horror and regret at the dreadfulness, the dread of it, and I throw my rifle away and tear off my gloves and kneel to cradle Yuri's head, no sound from me now, the blood coming out of the side of Yuri's scalp, out of Lilia, too, who is bleeding grossly onto the rugs shucked back from the dirt floor. Her sphincter gone and the stink of her. The bones in my ears are shrieking. Blood seems to be coming out of my own hands.

*Mother of God*, I cry and I pull Yuri away from the witch and I don't know what to do with him. I should try to run home with him on my back. Or better, leave him here in the witch's hovel and run alone to my brother, the doctor, and beg him to come and plug the hole I have made in my son's head. The foreigners' mine is closer but I can't go there.

I fetch the candle and stand the glass in the threshold. In the tired light, I see Yuri's eye is swelling out of its socket and I press his face between my gloves. Unwind the blue bandage from my wrist and dab at his temple, cursing and cursing. I pull off my hat and ease it over his wound and over his eye so I won't have to look at my atrocity.

A bawling like a baby's cry filters through the ringing in my ears. I turn to look at the witch, get up and go towards her because she looks to have rolled onto her side, the whole of her bloody front exposed. But then I have to back into the dark space behind the stove where I've thrown the gun because I see that Lilia is alive. Still alive or alive again, how can I tell? Her eyes astonished and her windpipe throbbing. Her shocking teeth chewing and chewing. Working away at a wad of something.

A shape is climbing from her, surging out of her mouth. And I realise it is the dirt and mud and snow she has consumed for years. Spilling and mixing with the blood leaked from her heart. Kneading together to form a clay. The swallowed dirt inside Lilia is lifting and becoming. Becoming an animal. A bear. Its snout and paws and fur revealing itself out of the elements of the air and the earth and her body. The apparition is stunning. The stove comes alight again into full fury even though there were only ashes left, and the bear rears up. Roars. Stands with its head against the ceiling of the hut and shows its great

tongue and teeth, its shadow huge on the chaotic walls, and it comes down on its paws and moves past me. I can feel the squall of its fur, real as the heat from the stove, as it passes me and it leaps over Yuri's body lying on the doorsill, its nose grazing his face. The bear goes out into the snow. I look through the broken doorway at it lumbering away into the trees, then back at the grim, empty body of the witch with its eyes and mouth now closed. The candle snuffs. I hear myself whimpering like a child.

I come from behind the stove, the hovel fallen into darkness, and I feel my way towards the open air and kneel beside Yuri. My whimpering turns to howling. *God God God*, I cry, slide my arm under Yuri's back and rock him, summoning or blaming the God who has not helped me but dealt me more than I can endure. I touch my son's face in the blackness. Even as my trembling fingers can tell the cold is coming into him, I feel on his lips the hot kiss of the bear.

My wretched son. The trace of his smile before, I know, Yuri's spirit will also cast and leave him. And I know exactly what that spirit will look like. I pull Yuri out of the hut and rest his broken head on the snow. Stagger across the clearing to my lantern torch under the tree. Turn it on and stretch its light to find Yuri's body. I wait at that frightened distance for the moment when his mouth opens. When the last convulsions of the wolf begin.

I have shocked you, Ilya says, smoothing his papers and dropping them into his coffin. I shock myself. He crouches and digs his knife into a fist-sized piece of tallow and lifts it free of the deerskin.

Ilya, I want to say: I've heard that story before in my dreams. I am the boy with the fish spirit and the bee spirit inside me. I know the end of the story and it isn't pretty.

But I say, I'm sorry for you, that's all.

Don't be sorry for me, Ilya and Hunapo say together.

Many years ago, Ilya says, I smuggled a pine cone. One seed with a wing that fell from a two-legged pine. I planted it. Buried it in the earth of this, my new country. In time, a small tree grew. Beyond hope, that immigrant put up needles. Volunteered to live. Not everything is lost.

During Ilya's story, my coffin has turned red. I lay the brush on the workbench and leave Hunapo carving and Ilya thrashing out his demons on the high bar and I walk up the garden and down the side of the hole. I dig. I row through roots and worms. I am a root, a relic. I uncover sheep bones, a rag turned to web, rusted slivers of tin. A toothless comb and there is the memory of the loved one with her jewelled mouth, her feet tied together, a dead siren, and I have to clamber up the toe-holds in the dirt wall, and spit her out on the grass.

Objects from the past can stop you in your tracks.

Hunapo has come up from the barn and is searching under the tree, slipping brugmansia seeds into the sleeve of her t-shirt. I think, Not everything is lost. I must be strong for her.

## Voices

You're trying to speak, aren't you. Your eyes follow me more and more.

*He's been digging a hole. He's already found me something I thought was lost.*

What?

*A machine.*

Why do you come back, Harvey? From this other life? I want to see this house that sleeps in the sun.

*You can't, Nina. I need you to stay up here.*

Can you hear the humming Arlitz? Harvey says there's an underground hive. He's found the entrance to the cave in the bush but he says the bees are dangerous.

*They're wild. They are dangerous. Any other words today?*

Just 'honey'. But he's vocalising more and he moved both his feet. We need to get you up soon, clever boy, put some weight on them. You say the bees are magic. How do you know? Tell me Harvey.

*My wife found them. The bees. They lived under a meadow we discovered. In a series of galleries, nests burrowed out of the clay. Five rings on their abdomens. There were hundreds of thousands of insects. I studied them, analysed the makeup of their honeycomb. Under my microscope I saw the power of the bee's body, its sublime cavernous composition, a mosaic of star-shaped cells. I'll show you later, if you want.*

I'd like that.

*Once, absentminded, I placed one bee body over another on the slides and the specimen was repelled. The insect skin hovered, spinning in space below the lens. I told Lilian the bees would disclose to me the secret of flight. I was only half right.*

*Within a year I'd developed my Theory of Clustered Structures. Our own hands, Nina, with their complex arrangement of cells are a source of kinaesthetic energy. I built my own structures from egg boxes and drinking straws, sheaves of wheat. I found I could channel the force from my fingers to make the hanging pyramid in the lounge spin. Or find a flower in a darkened room using as a wand one of Lilian's charcoal drawing sticks. I even convinced Lilian to wear a kitchen sieve on her head to ease her headaches. I*

*mentioned these small discoveries to my friend Bern but he laughed and said it sounded like voodoo to him.*

*You'll be slaughtering chickens next, Harv, he roared.*

*The next day, several colleagues asked me if I'd show them how I moved objects with my mind. I stopped telling Bern anything. I decided to keep the bees' existence secret.*

*Lilian and I harvested hundreds of bees. How is killing bees different to deer-hunting? she asked me once, but I knew I could justify the death of so many. I made the machine over winter, a platform with a pipe handle that folded up into a box like a painter's case. Layers of sandwiched bee skeletons between the two slices of wood. Held together with wing nuts. Crude but perfectly adequate. The flying machine sat on the workbench in my garage, waiting to be set free. The first fine day, I took Lilian to the meadow and asked her to lie down in the grass and observe the sky.*

*Be careful, she said. Stay away from the pond. There was a pond nearby, acidic water.*

*I'm just going to see what happens. Don't worry. I'll be back in no time. Less. I felt his foot move, did you notice?*

*Yes, he's finally closed his eyes. He's listening.*

*I opened the case in the shelter of a ti-tree hedge, engaged the lever that opened the louvres between the bee-bodies and lifted to twenty metres, flew over Lilian, and then descended. I cast no shadow. I hovered and watched her calm, expectant face, then moved in an arc to where I'd begun. You're looking doubtful.*

*I believe you. I know about magic.*

*As I was flying, I was thinking about the first day I met Lilian in a hospital corridor. She was wearing theatre greens and she was not at all pretty. Her nose and mouth were both skewed, like she was permanently on the verge of sneezing. Her eyes had a tugged-down look that gave this impression of dolefulness. Fancy some lunch? she said. I was forty-three and lonely so I went. There was no lunch. Lilian took me up to the roof and showed me the pipe where the theatre gases were vented.*

*So this is where you bring all your dates? I said. We sat and inhaled halothane until we passed out. When I woke up, Lilian was lying, mid-conversion on the yellow*

*crossbar of the helipad H. Come score a try, Harvey, she said. I looked right into her face then. She was as lovely as anaesthetic. But I couldn't bring myself to kiss that knitted seam of her hare lip. I lay beside her and drummed rotor-blade sound effects under my clavicles, hoping for a rescue helicopter to come out of the sky. Then she kissed me and it was completely alright. Funny how things come back to you when you're travelling in time. Lilian's face. The face I know now, given the grace of time and intimacy, as beautiful.*

*I landed beside her on the grass. Clouds, she said, when I reappeared. One like a mushroom. And I saw an odd flash of light. Like a square cloud with straight edges, in the corner of my eye.*

*The shape of my platform. According to my watch, I'd lost an hour but the hand on Lilian's watch had barely moved.*

*I wondered where on earth you were, she said. Not on earth, obviously, And I promised myself, if you ever came back, Harvey, I'd never let you do it again. You never kissed me goodbye!*

*I showed her a test tube I'd had in my pocket. Two holes scorched in the glass like a tiny bullet had passed through. I've rewound time out there, I said. Of course, Lilian couldn't stop me trying again.*

*Time travel? Did you hear that, Arlitz? That's quite a story, Harvey.*

*I wouldn't call it time travel. I'm not exactly sure what happened to time. It was as if pieces of it were mislaid. My watch went haywire, hours ticking backwards, and if I'd carried in my pocket a new insect specimen, the vial was empty when I landed - a puncture in the glass, the edge of the hole charred. Once, I'd felt a burning in my pocket and discovered a pupa in the tube where a few seconds earlier there had been a moth - the insect's life reversed. I avoided flying near people; I had to be careful with cause and effect disruptions. I'd arrive back to find my launch site pristine, no clue to my presence in the untrampled grass. Or I'd drive home and Lilian had no knowledge of my absence. The hours were gone. Or had not yet existed. I was returning to a present that was really my past.*

*This was the paradox. Although I felt as if I'd experienced more time in my life than Lilian, I wasn't aging. Over ten years, I wondered at my face in the mirror, saw the*



*perpetual smoothness of my forehead where my wife's grew wrinkled. If I flew only once a week, my own entropy was halted. I wrote copious notes to myself, detailing my discoveries, but I rarely needed to consult them. My memory of 'future' events appeared to remain intact. It seemed that, in the loop, I was simply reliving my past quota of time, the knowledge I had gained of the future, intact. I didn't pretend to comprehend it. I'd toyed with the idea of becoming more youthful, say, forty, but, despite my notes, I was loath to risk it. I had a horror of rewinding the clock so far that I had no motive to seek out a notebook. I couldn't bear not remembering. Not knowing about my flying platform, or the insects. Of course, Lilian and Lilian's memory were a different proposition.*

I wondered why you looked so much younger than her.

*She had a bad experience with a young woman who nearly bled to death in our house. Someone had told the woman there was a doctor in the country that did terminations. Lilian felt sorry for the woman, a girl really. A Maori girl. It was illegal for Lilian to operate. She should never have done it. Her practising certificate had lapsed. But the girl was desperate. Her boyfriend was being released from jail and the boyfriend's brother had got her pregnant. Blue, that was his name, the brother. I don't remember hers. That night, Blue brought the girl back. Lilian had perforated the uterus; the girl's abdomen flooded with blood. Lilian repaired the tear. I helped her. The poor girl was close to death. Her awful pallor. Lilian begged me not to call an ambulance. She'd be struck off. I did call one. Lilian went bush before it arrived. In those hills over there. At some stage she killed a deer and then tied a rope around the rifle trigger and put it over her toe. She didn't do it though. She said a wolf came out of the forest and spoke to her: 'It's all right. She'll live.'*

A wolf? His pulse is racing. Perhaps we should talk about something nicer. Calmer.

*There was no wolf. She deteriorated after that. Never got to the disciplinary committee. A stroke. Vascular dementia, as you know. She used to drive me mad asking: What's the time Harvey? Until even that stopped. She was a body floating. There were no words to tether her. I kept announcing the time anyway, like a talking clock. The only thing she showed any interest in was a doll she thought was her baby, our daughter, Renée.*

*On her birthday, I decided to do it. Use the machine. I woke Lilian and led her into the garden. I'd screwed a one-legged stool to the platform and I lowered her on to it. There was just enough room for me to stand behind the stool and reach around her and engage the lever. The platform lifted only about a metre off the lawn. I was too heavy. I needed someone under sixty kilos. And the next day, my grandson, who I hadn't seen for many years, showed up at our door. Do you think there's much hope Nina?*

For your grandson? Yes. He's a survivor. We'll bring him from the darkness into light.

*What if Arlitz has already found the light? What if he's done something we only dream of? Conquered the mind and reached tranquillity?*

I think he wants to come back. He's lost a lot of time.

*Not at all. He's ten years younger.*

Harvey has gone to bed. I'm not sure his story was good for you. You are twitchy. Something jump-started in your brain.

Sometimes, Arlitz, I hear Father Giorgi's voice floating over me the story of the Trinity, three golden branches bent toward the earth and the white birds, 'white, white as snow'. Harvey says to get to you in Te Whare Moera he has to sting himself with a bee. He goes into the cave and waits for the sentry bees to come out and then he nets one and traps it under his shirt. That's the secret. Do you think it's possible? A wormhole that opens up and he can pass through into a parallel universe, a different path? A deviation, he calls it. A slit in the fabric of the time-space continuum. There is nothing to disprove this possibility. No quantum physical denial, Harvey says. The universe allows it. He explained it to me like this: Time is a page that has two dots on it. When you curve the page like a saddle and align the dots, touch them pupil to pupil, that is a wormhole. You can leap through. He thinks there has to be an altered state of consciousness to achieve this. Deep meditation. Sleep. Coma. The unconscious and the nearly dead have a way in. Did you dream the cave, Arlitz? Is the cave a wormhole into another life and the secret is the sting. You're a little bee, aren't you, handsome boy. A pupa. Stuck in your cell. Stunted. You just need to hatch. I saw a cloud of those bees once swarming over the trees.

## Pain

I lie in bed and watch the curtains swell: I don't want to be stunted. I get up and examine myself in the wardrobe mirror. Stunted. I dress and climb out my window into the garden.

Ilya has dug up potatoes. He's made a pouch out of his shirt and is carrying around his litter of spudlets, trying not to look proud. The pedantic in me wonders how all our crops are growing in unison, out of season. I weed, ironically, around my dandelions. I've read that plants have feelings. In years to come, do you think they'll discover the pain plants experience when they're lopped off at the stem? The torment of lettuce? I should have pressed a flower between these pages. Perhaps over the words 'cold-blooded narcissist'. I wonder if Ilya is planning potato vodka.

After we've sanitized our hands, we eat breakfast and then re-group for Group in the Rainy Day Recreation Room.

Harvey says, Tell us about a relationship that stands out in your life.

I already wrote about ours. Harvey wants us to rewrite the difficult stories from our pasts and make better ones. I'm not sure I can. A better thing I did get from our relationship, though, is a lack of esteem for myself. Goodbye negative emotions and self-criticism, goodbye delusions. All I had to do was serve. That is tremendously centring. My emotions no longer owned me. Pain was a pleasure. Submission is not a weakness, I thought. There's power in slavishness. I am strong. Does that surprise a man who thought he was in charge?

You brought the urologist home and to please you, I agreed to have him. I didn't know if the contract I'd signed at our second interview was still in the lock box in your study. I didn't know if you'd shared with the urologist the rules we'd written down for safe conduct. And I was in no position to speak, gagged, as I was, with a clotique. Your colleague had that old-fashioned doctor's bag and I watched him take out his tattooing kit and etch a black bone on your back. A femur. The bone represented, I guess, your interests in the field of blood and marrow, and in dogs. What will the bitch have? the urologist asked. Whatever you choose, you said. Then you left me to him.

The pain of metal pins inserted through nipples was nothing like the pain I endured later.

When you returned, I was angry and crying and you took out my gag and held my head and said, Shh, shh baby. You can sleep in the bed with me.

Why didn't you tell him our safe signal? I cried. For a moment I forgot you were my Master. You went and got ice cubes and ran them over my back, over the raised tracks made by his belt. I kissed you around the cling-filmed edges of your tattoo, the inflamed bone, and we slept.

## Loss

The urologist first told me you wanted me to castrate myself. Was it your idea? Truthfully, I'd never really cared much for the dangling sac between my legs. I thought, as an act of love, I should. All I wanted was to be loved in return for my obedience.

The night it happened I examined with an almost scientific awareness the mechanisms of it. The moment of climax itself I couldn't recall; it's still lost to me. It was as if I'd gone somewhere outside the moment, perhaps missed it all together and skipped to the future. Even though I tried to focus and slow the moment, it was only the detail of the turning back I remembered.

I concentrated on those seconds, the return from the point where I'd fallen into indescribable what? Ecstasy? Agony? Not fallen. Risen. Both. I could see myself changing direction, my heart the determined footfall of someone running to get me. The pounding closer and closer, then a quick slowing to a measured beat, a spade turning the sod of my vessels. Then a thrumming of blood advancing. A chain gang of shovellers digging towards my arteries, trying to excise them. The spades plunging rhythmically into my chambers, as hard and as even as a warning gong, striking my heart in exact measure. Done. Done. Done. Digging the grave for my little death. Is the digging metaphor clearer now? The urologist - I had no idea he was even in the flat - binding my wrists. You putting pills in my mouth. I swallowed them. I was trembling with fear. Also excitement. The smell of disinfectant as the urologist swiped a soaked cloth over my groins. You held my collar tight while he wound rubber bands around my scrotum and

injected, thoughtfully, a syringe of lignocaine. At that moment, during that dual death of exhilaration and separation, it was impossible to tell the difference between ecstasy and agony. The moment I lost my balls to the urologist's scalpel, I was in a frenzy of excitement. You were. We lay together on your bed and you held me as the urologist stitched.

Then the retreat, the ploughing backwards into my veins. I was fiercely aware of all the pathways in my body, the rivers purling my arms and legs and the capillaries feeding my fingers, the pressure in my eyes and sinuses and ear canals. I lay, my breath labouring with the force of you beside me, breathing hot at the back of my neck and I listened for the retaliation of my insides, listened at a distance to the spasm of my intestines. I saw what the urologist intended to do next. How could you not tell me? He grabbed my withering dick. I must have protested. Fought against it, surely, before he scalped it off. So fast and cleanly. I went into shock - the gushing aorta and veins.

The days after were worse. I remember lying on my side in your bed with the irony of a frozen vegetable packet clasped to me, crying while you stroked my head and complimented me on the cleanness and holiness of my new mound of Venus. My capon, you called me. You are genuine perfection, you said. I believed you. You had a present made for me. A silver tee, with a diamond decorating its cup that fitted into the end of my plastic urethra.

When I could walk again, we took the sandwich bag containing my frozen parts and dropped it off the bridge. It was dark and ceremonial. You climbed onto the jumper barrier between the streetlights and I felt almost euphoric. Goodbye cruel world, you yelled, and I watched my manhood on its final descent until it was lost in the trees and I imagined it landing, splayed in the moss. Thawing beside the motorway among the graves and ferns.

We observed my body become almost hairless, so I never again had to use a razor for its intended purpose. My voice lost its perception of depth and became gentle and pleading. Eventually, I came to admire the fine knotted scar that adorned my perineum. I somehow knew without thinking that I had transformed my subjugation into something empowering. I was someone new.

But then a wave of grief.

I took to leaving the flat while you were at work, lifting the bed leg and slipping out the chain, unlocking the manacles with a paperclip, searching for clothes and walking back and forth over the bridge, gazing mournfully into the gulch at the crawling traffic, my crotch aching. I'd look at myself in the mirror and convince myself I'd wanted to be like this all along.

I think about my father who made me dig graves to man-up. I think of my friend Valek who wanted to be a woman. I think about my mother who never wanted a son. All these stories that made me. That made me jump.

## Man

Can you see how your lack of manhood makes you brave? Harvey says.

I can. I imagine it's like this, too, for people who've been to war or survived a terrible illness. They have the secret of their ordeal, their private strength. The thing we shouldn't tell. A badge we wear inside a lapel or tucked in a pocket that allows us a certain smugness. The secret knowing gives us courage. 'I've been through more shit than you'd ever dream of and look at me here alive. How clever I am and blessed and just a little bit superior.' Sometimes I do find the strength the amputation has given me.

You are giving voice to your body, Harvey says. Do you think it may be time to stop hiding? Disclose yourself?

I disclose myself. To Harvey and to you as I write this: I love Hunapo.

I'm not surprised about that, Arlitz.

But how is that possible for a man like me, Harv? A man mismatched with my anatomy.

This is a destination that life led you to. It will work out.

## Bath

I lie in the bath, submerged, my heartbeat pinging off the enamel and think: I love Honey. I'm daydreaming about her giving birth to our son, his head a downy egg emerging from her. When the boy is hatched, we see white feathers where his genitals should be. Honey cries out and I say, no, it's all right, he's divine.

I finally run out of breath and put my face into the air. I wonder if I've ever loved a man. What did I feel for you? I want to love Honey. Make love to her. It's beyond reason because I don't have the hormones for it, the equipment. I desire her with my head and heart. I think I loved you but perhaps I'm wrong. I do know I've never hated anyone. My most extreme emotion is empathy. I feel sorry for everyone.

It's not as if sex with a woman's repellent to me. I just never considered it before. I'm curious about it now. And confused. How can I reconcile these feelings I have for Honey with this body?

When you wanted to punish me, you took a woman to bed. My friend likes to watch, you told one overweight girl you'd drugged in a bar and I was compelled by my leg chain to lie on the floor and listen in the dark to the strangled noises of the girl as she endured your satyric and indifferent sex, pitying both her and myself.

You told me, Every man knows, for fucking, any hole will do. This is no doubt true. But, I wonder, how is sex with a woman possible for a man like me, more swan than man? Nothing but a cavity between my legs. I remember a painting I saw of Leda mounted by Zeus who'd transformed into a swan, the erotic god-swan heavy-winged and opulent, poised with his beak entering the beautiful mortal's mouth. I know that consummating my love with Honey is impossible in the accepted sense. But, there are many ways to love.

I haven't locked the bathroom door. I don't know why. Do I want her to find me? My ears are underwater when I hear Honey say, Sorry. I stand up and grab a towel. But she has time. Time to take in my white skin, the silver posts in my nipples, the red cursive on my ribs and something that will take her brain several seconds to comprehend because it is doubtful she has a reference for anything like it in her memory.



She's about to step back into the hallway, but I say, No, please. I hold the towel over myself and climb out of the bath and walk around Hunapo to snib the lock. She steps sideways and ends up in front of the basin, gripping her sponge bag against her stomach like a shield.

And while she obviously doesn't know what to think, I'm thinking, okay, the truth is coming.

She pretends she hasn't seen. Begins unzipping her bag. But there it is.

Isn't.

This is as good a time as any, I think. I drop the towel. I stand against the angelfish shower curtain, water dripping off me and I say, Well, Hunapo.

She turns her back but we can see each other's faces in the mirror.

Go ahead. I want you to see.

So Honey turns to me. I see her thinking, has he tucked his bits between his legs, that party trick that men do when they're drunk and naked? And I can almost see the spark leaping across her brain and inventing a path that leads to a new cognition, a new horror. And she sees where my pubic bones separate, and on that triangle of skin you once loved, if only for a short time, the scar with the plastic tube jutting out of it. Jesus, she's thinking. No junk, no jewels. A Ken doll, I bet, is what I remind her of. A blatantly smooth pudendum as you requested. In the end, it was the tube, the invasion and starkness of it, you said, that turned your stomach.

Honey considers my nakedness and then she makes herself stop looking at my cleared crotch. She looks me in the face, holds me with her eyes so that without taking my eyes off hers I pick up the towel and wrap it round my waist.

Now you know.

You didn't tell anyone.

It never really came up in conversation. Harvey knows.

Does it hurt? Did it?

I don't remember, I say, which isn't true because I remember deliberately making myself forget the pain.

Did you have a disease or something?

I'm relieved. Relieved at last that one of them has seen me and knows. I feel bad for Honey. The shock of me. I wonder if she will have any hopes for me. Us. Now I have shown her my failing.

Only a disease of gender, I say. I did know some very diseased people who, um, bereaved me.

Christ.

Do I scare you?

Nah. Then Honey does something that shocks me. She puts her sponge bag on the basin and comes in close to me, wraps her arms around me and presses her stomach against mine. Puts her cheek on my wet chest. It's the first time I've been held like this in years. Perhaps forever. Really held. And as I make my arms circle Hunapo, I start to cry.

Be just? she whispers.

It's Kafka.

Oh, she says, but she doesn't know the story. She kisses me on the lips. She tastes like bark. Then she steps back and puts her fingertips on my words. Be just what?

Be just whatever you want.

You're cold. Get dressed. I want to give you something.

I'm a man in my mouth, I say stupidly. I feel like a diver breaking the surface after a free dive, my cells dilated with gas. She hands me my shirt.

We go to Honey's room. Can I tell you something, Hunapo? I knew a Wade and a Blue. Wade was bad news.

He was.

I think I know you too.

She opens the drawer in her bedside table and takes out a little bottle. Of course you do, Arlitz.

I worked with Wade at Oak Sea. I came to your house the day you buried your koro. Your real name is Honey. I got rid of Wade once. Not for long enough though.

What do you mean?

We sit on her bed and I tell her.

## Burn

I'm in the crematorium one night and he comes to the door. Makes me walk in front of him down to the road. In the back of his van is a black duvet wrapped around the shape of a man. Duct-taped. I can see the stain on the duvet is blood. A big, dead man. I help Wade drag him over the wall behind the security cameras in the oak trees and up the hill. We have to stop a lot and breathe.

Knife or bullet? I say, to make conversation. We're both bending over and holding our stomachs from the effort.

Shut up, faggot, he says.

We have to wait while the furnace comes up to temperature.

Just don't fuck with me.

I want to ask him about you, Honey, but his eyes are too weird.

It's hard to push the loved one into five hundred degrees of flames without a coffin surrounding him, but we manage to launch him in like we're tossing a sack of wood, and I push his feet in with the scraper and lower the door. I turn up the heat and Wade goes around the side to stand by the peephole.

We watch the duvet blaze. Then Wade jumps back because the loved one's muscles are contracting; the fists ball up and the arms come up to the loved one's chest, the head tipping forward like a boxer about to punch.

I laugh and Wade punches me in the back so I'm on the floor and winded.

Get up, pussy, he says. How long will this take?

An hour.

He pulls out his smokes and sits on my chair. We say nothing. I concentrate on stacking ash boxes, and on the pain of my punched kidney.

The loved one's bones fall through the grille like bits of coral.

You better get all that bone out and give it to me in one of them boxes. If you tell anyone, I will come back and kill you, Wade says.

He knows I won't say a word. I scrape the coral into a tray. Right before I tip it in the pulveriser, I think: I can save Honey. A little glint among the rubble. A tooth with a gold filling.

I give the tooth to my father and write a testimony that Wade held a knife to my throat and made me burn a body. My father manages to get everything kept quiet because a funeral home having that kind of cremation on its books is bad for business. I'm sorry they didn't keep him in jail longer.

Oh, Arlitz, Honey says, bouncing the bed a little. She kisses me again. On the cheek. If it wasn't for you doing that, I'd never have met Blue. Had Tamati. She gives me the bottle filled with brown liquid. There's enough there for that psycho who cut you. I think Blue is dead. If he was alive, he'd come find me, don't you reckon? She starts to cry. I want to get my baby. He'll be bones, just bones. He's in a river.

I would like to watch Wade's skin ripple and burn away, his fat sizzle and his heart, that shrivelled-up thing, cook. But poisoning will be adequate. I can finish something Ilya wanted to do. When Wade dies, no one will call him a loved one. Where is the river? I say to Hunapo.

It's called Waineke. It can't be far.

Maybe Honey and I will be able to rewrite ourselves some better stories. After I've avenged her I'll come find you, lover. I'll say, I'm not dead, can I buy you a drink? Health and strength.

## Baby

Miriam looks at the deer hide Ilya has stretched on a board and propped against the station wagon.

*Make sure the parents weren't alcoholics*, was the first thing I said when Renée told me. Then I had to say: *That's wonderful, darling*.

We have no idea what Miriam's talking about, but we're glad she's up and about. I am. I believe I'm the only one that sees her.

There were a lot of steps to take, she says, stroking the hide. Their church helped them. Infertility counselling. The Adoption Preparation and Education Programme. Renée and Ewan were accepted as suitable parents. A baby was matched to them on the other side of the world – Siberia, of all places – out of thousands of needy babies. Not even orphans, a lot of them. Just their hopeless parents abandoning them to the care of the state. They waited and waited to be allowed to meet their baby. Documents and letters and photos were exchanged. The baby crawled. Took her first steps. At last they were summoned. To Baby House Number 3. A life-changer. And Renée had asked me to come.

Shonky. That's what Dinks would have called the plane. The window had a crack in it. I matched it to the roads and rivers below like a game. Imagined those long-ago men in their brown clothes, cutting through the wilderness, scoring a way east through huge, dreary grafts of green and beige. Through snow. It had taken us months to get visas just to get in.

And there were so many lakes. They shone up at us like organs. One shaped like lungs and another, a heart. Smaller ones - kidneys. I thought of a bird navigating that body, urging itself along the veins and crevices, its wings finally collapsing. I was sure a lot of poets had already thought of that metaphor. Migrating poem-birds dropping exhausted into the earth-giant's cavities, unnoticed.

I remember how I felt on that plane. Discomposed. My organs slightly out of place. I remember the plane landing clumsily, swerving, all the passengers calling out and laughing. Renée and I held hands on the armrest. Smiled and squeezed. Renée's gold cross, stabbing at her throat. Ewan was holding Renée's other hand, stretching her between us.

*Tomorrow we'll see her*, Ewan said. He mimed screaming maniacally, the tendons on his neck popping. Renée copied him. Jazz hands. Church hands. I managed a chortle. *You two!*

Renée had given me a copy of one of the photos. Slipped inside the guidebook. A chubby face in a snowsuit. Dark hair, brows and lashes. Her name was Masha. I felt my heart stir then when I thought of her. It was odd, really. I had no idea what the child was even like. How can you bond with a face in a photo? With those snatched paragraphs of her development, translated and mailed through the air? A baby who'd already lived without us for thirteen months. Perhaps that was my anxiety. Traumatizing a baby. Taking her away from everything she knew. Expecting Masha to cast off her little former life so we could dunk her into a new world entirely.

Miriam? I whisper.

Yes?

My mother used to call me Masha. I think you're my grandmother. Lilian. Only you look too young.

I don't know how I can be your grandmother. I've only just met you. This needs softening, Miriam says, clutching the edge of the deerskin. Anyway, as I was saying, we were meant to stay two weeks to get to know the baby. Wait in that immense country. With its abrupt people. It's strange alphabet. The hotel was horrendously expensive. Five lines of extra fees and gratuities on the bill slip. Of course, I paid it. I didn't go on about it. Renée and Ewan were so happy. Animated. Kissing each other in front of me.

The woman from the agency was waiting outside the hotel. Her name of course, was Olga. She'd drive us in her Volga. She made a joke about it. *I'm Olga in the Volga*. Ewan sat in the front next to her. We travelled on the highway along the lake shore, hemmed in by hedges and wooden houses so we only got glimpses of the water. Everything diminishing the further we drove from the city. The houses got poorer and poorer. No, I shouldn't say 'diminishing'. That's me putting my foreign eyes on the place. I would seriously like to live the moderate life of those simple people. Unaffected. A log cabin in the country. I even suggested it in a postcard I wrote to Dinks. I was missing his

quiet, sensible presence. Wishing he'd come too. I could imagine him hewing logs and slotting them together. I wish I could see him now. Where is my husband?

He'll be here. You should finish your casket.

Yes.

She's working on the border of her basket, sharpening the stakes' ends with the secateurs and splicing them into the weft.

What's the time?

Half past.

No rest for the wicked. I'd better finish this basket.

And your story.

*Look up to eleven o'clock, please,* Olga ordered. A building high on a cliff that Olga informed us was the biggest something kind of telescope in the world. Then there was a bright flash of the lake between leaves. *This lake deepest lake in the world,* Olga said. *Contains in the world one fifth fresh water that is not ice.* Then the shore opened up and there was the deepest lake. Surprisingly large waves running over its surface, a pebbled beach. Water stretching as far we could see. Huge. A horizon with no land.

Renée massaged Ewan's shoulder over the top of the seat where the headrest should be. *The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains. The world, and those who dwell in it,* she said.

I had to bite my tongue when Renée just came out with those things. Hell's bells. Pines and birches and other trees I didn't know spread to the hills on our left. I recognised lilacs and lilies-of-the-valley by the houses' tumbledown fences. We drove past a town with a dock and fishing boats and a market on the lakefront where people had set up stalls and were cooking over charcoal burners. *Smoke fish,* said Olga. *Delicious. You must try later.* We never did. And then we turned inland.

Baby House Number 3 was up a long rutted lane. It was a relief to get out of the jolting car. A rundown dwelling with a weedy garden and a fenced dirt play area in front. A basic climbing frame and some wooden boxes.

My lungs felt battered. I couldn't get the air out of them. I was afraid suddenly of what we might find. Institutionalised babies. Rocking and banging in their chewed, lead-painted cots. Those images flashing in my head - a film I'd made myself watch. One of

those notorious orphanages. You wouldn't believe. Boys - youths - naked, heads shaved, herded into a concrete room. The kind of room you could sluice out with a hose. A woman with a bucket of porridge and one spoon. Most of the boys not even aware she's there. They pressed into the walls with their bony shoulders, their anxious signalling hands. A few clamoured around her with their mouths open. The woman, grinning, so unashamed. Big, bald boys with ribs like harps, waiting for baby slop. Their eyes swivelling to the high windows. And a crippled boy, left so long in his cot with his hips deformed that his legs had grown upwards, over his shoulders, so he had to walk about on his hands. But he was the favourite. He got extras from the woman's bucket and smiled and smiled. I feel sick thinking about it now. Those crooked legs and teeth. The shared spoon.

Irina, the director, came out to meet us. I could breathe out. A normal, kind face. We all smiled and shook hands. Words were exchanged. The director took us up the wonky steps and into a hallway. We were shown into an office and asked to sit. Irina spoke to Olga again. I thought I saw something in Olga's face, a perturbation, but who can say. I couldn't read those people's mannerisms.

*Babies having toilet, said Olga. We must wait in office.*

*We make tea now, said Olga and she and Irina left the office.*

*I don't want tea, said Renée. I want to see her now.*

*Look, a few minutes more will be okay.* I liked the way Ewan drew the line at Renée pouting. *Renée*, he said. Then he closed his eyes and bowed his head and Renée did too and they were away. I never thought my daughter would marry a churchy husband. Do the whole baptism, born-again thing. Life is full of surprises.

*Father, we just want to say thank-you for bringing us here today. For your love and faith in us as we embark on this new journey.*

I scraped my chair a bit as I turned round. The office was basic. Books. Folders. Framed photos of groups of toddlers. It all seemed orderly and clean. Unscary.

*We pray that Masha, not of our flesh but of our hearts, is healthy and that you give us the means to bring her up faithfully in your holy light.*

Or some such thing he said. Oh dear. It's a whole other language, this Out-Loud-Praying. How does one learn to speak it? Is there an instruction manual? I remembered I'd left my phrasebook on the plane. Oh, bugger, I nearly said.



*Father, we ask you to bless our baby and mother and we thank you, Lord, for your infinite love. Amen.*

*Amen.*

Mercifully short. *Amen.*

Apart from Renée's tap-tapping shoe, it was very quiet. *It's very quiet for a house full of children*, I said. Then a baby yowled.

*Aaah*, said Renée. *That could be her.*

It was a much younger baby. Newish. My daughter didn't know what she was in for. It's impossible to explain the reality. What it's like to be responsible for a child. Every second of a tetchy day and a screaming night. The mind-numbing boredom. I'd only been able to stand it for ten months. It was wonderful to get back to my appreciative patients. I had newfound empathy for the pregnant ones. Renée thrived at 'Little Steps'.

How strange it must be to take on a baby birthed by someone else. I'd explained to Renée about what they were just discovering. Post-orphanage behaviours. Emotional volatility. Attachment disorder. 'When a baby hasn't attached to a consistent care-giving adult.' I told Renée about that experiment where psychologists studied a group of babies. Apart from feeding and cleaning them, their so-called caregivers deprived the babies of nurture. Didn't give them a look or a touch. The experiment was stopped after four months because the babies all perished. Just gave up.

*Mum. Don't be silly. Masha's been cuddled.* Renée hadn't even been startled. Had I meant to scare her?

It could have been monkey babies, come to think of it, not human.

*Have they looked her in the eye, though?* I said. Both eyes? Talked to her? How many mental milestones was she missing?

*I've set my heart on her*, Renée said.

Like a bearing for flight. Well. Masha was young. We had plenty of time to make up for any deficiencies.

*Where are those women?* Renée got up and went to examine the photos on the wall. Then she opened the door and looked down the hallway.

*Anything?*

*Sit down, Née* said Ewan.

I got up and looked out, too.

Irina and Olga appeared at the end of the hallway. Another woman was carrying Masha. The baby had two stubby pigtails tied in her dark hair with pink ribbons. She was dressed in a pink t-shirt and knitted leggings. She seemed much bigger than a one-year-old. I didn't know why I didn't feel excited enough. I was actually wondering about the promised tea. There was no sign of it. Renée sprinted towards the women. Grabbed hold of Masha's hands.

*Hello darling, she said but then she let go of the baby. Gave a little squeak. Oh! Is this her?*

*Yes, said Olga. This is Masha, your new daughter. Congratulations.*

*No, said Renée. No. This isn't her.*

My stomach twisted. Renée tweaked at her gold cross. The three women kept walking up the hallway, ushering Renée along in front of them. I put my arms across the office doorway. Something told me, if the women got inside the room, there was no turning back.

*What's wrong?*

*This isn't her, Mum. Her voice quavering. There must be a mistake.*

Ewan came up behind me and said, *What is it, Née?*

I asked my daughter, *Are you sure?*

Olga's voice was firm. *This is Masha. You are forgetting. She is growing a lot.*

I looked at the flat-faced girl. There were epicanthic folds in the corners of her wide-spaced eyes. A snouty nose. The smooth philtrum. Her ears attached too low.

*They're saying this is Masha. I know it isn't. We've been looking at her photo for months. It isn't, is it?* Renée's chin trembled. She looked hard at Olga. Pleaded. *Can you get our baby, please?*

Ewan ducked under my arm. *Look. We want the baby we came for. We've come a long way.*

*You take this Masha. She's a good girl.* The director, out-of-the-blue, was able to speak English.

I shook my head. *This baby has foetal alcohol syndrome.* That was awful, labelling the sad, gawping child. *My daughter is not adopting her. Where is the daughter*

*she was promised?* I felt terrible. Shaky. Like I was still going up and down on that potholed road.

Irina sighed. *I'm sorry. We need to talk now. We think her parents were dead. But yesterday, two days, Masha's father was coming here. He is coming out from prison and he said I want my daughter and he take her. Away. My staff are crying, crying. We already inform the police.*

Renée crying. *No, no, no. I want her. Get me Masha. Now. Ewan. Mummy. I want Masha. Screeching. I want Masha. I want my baby.* She crumpled onto the floor and pummelled the plastic hall runner. *Ewan. Make them get her.* Ewan crouching with his arms around her. A door opened. A teenaged girl in an apron and a cluster of half-dressed toddlers stood staring at us.

*Now, said Olga, we don't want trauma. There are some other children. Please come. We will look.*

*Call the father.* Renée shrieked. *Tell him we'll pay him. I'm going to be sick.*

And Renée was a little bit sick. There on the runner.

Ewan shouted. *This isn't good enough!*

My heart was flapping and flapping. I wondered how I would ever get to the end of it.

What did you do, Miriam?

Renée didn't want to see any other children. They were all older anyway. She was in shock. Olga took us back to the hotel. That afternoon I was standing in the entrance of the hotel waiting for the day to be finished when Olga drove up.

*I have a baby for you,* she whispered. *A new boy.*

*My daughter's not well,* I said.

*You come, please. The police commissioner sends me. A woman has fallen from a roof and cannot look after her baby. Everything will be arranged quickly. Papers. You must come now.*

For some reason, I got into Olga's car.

## Dig

My mother told me my birth mother died after falling from a roof. I was saved by snow. But that's not true. My mother was a witch. My father, a shaman who danced away illness and became a wolf. His father was a fur farmer who, in this life, helped me make a coffin. A doctor dunked me in water to revive me because I was almost as dried out and dead as a paper baby. What matters, I know, is the stories. They've been here all along. Waiting to move through me.

I tell Harvey at dinner, I'm going to confront my lover, my *ex-lover*, in a letter. I am. Write something to the effect: I am no longer your slave.

I won't tell Harvey I'm thinking of leaving. As soon as the digging is done.

Do you remember the thing you dug up? Harvey asks. I want to remind you what it is. He lugs the thing onto his desk. You've seen it before.

What is it?

It's a flying platform.

Miriam told us about it.

Yes. I built it. Do you remember flying on it?

Flying. Right.

You don't remember coming to our house up there?

When?

After the bridge.

After I jumped off the bridge?

No. you didn't. You didn't jump.

Ah. I think I'd remember that.

Can you remember? Your grandmother had dementia. I asked you to help her.

Did I help her? Look. The last thing I remember is climbing onto the jumper barriers. My lover left me for another man. I walked through the rain and climbed up. Stepped off. I woke up here with a cracked head. With the rest of these gentle souls with a tendency to falling.

I go outside into the half-dark. A three-quarter moon is rising, a thin cord attaching it to a single cloud. I think about the paper twin who never opened its lungs to the air. Was it a girl? Did I suck the life out of her, my sister? Did her femininity become mine?

There's a rope tied to the poison-tree so I can lower myself into the hole.

Ilya's screwed-up poem is resting on a root. An offering or rubbish, who knows. I can just make out the words.

Hi Old Earth, will you say your secrets  
if I put my ear on the worms and  
listen. My son sleeps under  
the grass in a room made out of ice  
his spirit a stone dug up,  
a lens that rattles in  
a boy's spade.

Too many dead children haunting Furry Moyra. And the inmates haunt Furry Moyra too. We who've all tried dying and are synchronous in our failure.

I pick up the shovel and dig. I'm way down now, the height of two tall men under the earth, the wrestle of dirt on spade. The air is cool and brittle. Perhaps the humming has been there all along. My twin's heartbeat on the back of my newly-formed neck. Her embryonic purr. I thrash away at the ground, flailing the shovel over my head to throw my load into the twilight, a wild bone freed from the earth.

It's me. Hunapo. I've finished. Honey's voice above me.

Hang on, I say. I hoist myself up the toe-holds and we sit against the hill of dug dirt. The hens making their twilight noises in the coop.

It's cool, your hideout. Look at that moon. It's the tenth night. Huna. That means everything is hidden. A bad day for planting. She puts an arm around me.

I think to myself: If I had a dick, it might be springing up.

This is really beautiful, I say. The lid of her bone box is exquisite. I can smell she's oiled it with linseed. She's tied the lid on with plaited flax. I trace the curl of a carved wave.

He liked the beach, she says. He was brave in the waves. But I can't put him in a box under water. Women aren't meant to carve, you know. Wade said that. He said I'm bad luck.

You're the best luck for me. I'm going to help you. Tell me about Tamati.

I'll tell you down there.

Really?

I can't say it out in the open. It's the kind of story that needs to be hidden. Buried.

Honey puts the bone box at the edge of the hole and steps down the rungs of earth and I follow her.

## **Tamati**

The girl is in the van. She's between them. Blue, driving. Tamati, asleep in his carseat. The girl could kiss that pudgy leg sticking out of his nappy. It's dusk or maybe dawn. A country road, bush and paddocks. Blue driving fast. He turns to look at her and she sees it's not Blue at all but Wade. She wonders why Wade's cheek is scratched up and bleeding and she almost puts out her hand to touch him but his face is fixed in a weird way. They are driving up a hill, the van loud with the effort. She has had a terrible dream and has woken feeling sick and dizzy with it. She shakes her head trying to think. Where is she going with Wade? Her head aches and she puts her face in her hands and tries to imagine why there's blood down her sweatpants and on her fingers and why her ribs are sore and between her legs and why she feels so gutted, like someone has scoured all the insides out of her.

Then she knows what is true, the appalling flash of remembering and she sits up and tips Tamati's head towards her and sees the baby's hair all dark and woven together.

Blood is dried in all the hollows of his ear, his bottom lip dropped open. She screams and Wade says, *shut up*. She cries, *stop, stop*.

But she knows Wade won't stop. The gun is between his legs and they are headed somewhere and he will get rid of them. She knows it deliberately. Knows that's where they're headed. To the bush. He's lived in there on his own, hunting, when he was a kid. Wade knows deep, hidden places where only pigs survive. She is holding Tamati's fist and everything inside her gives up.

She drifts away for a while and then the windscreen becomes clear again. She can't look at either of them, just focuses on the van's weak headlight weaving over the tarseal. The yellow line appearing and disappearing. White sticks taped with red on the ditch edges, fences, the telephone wires, poles ringed with possum bands shining in the full moonlight. The country things she knows. She recognises this road. She doesn't know how the van's still on it, the way Wade's driving. A creek running along the right side. The hill they've come down and the bush rising on the left. She's been on this road before. Two years ago when Blue had found out about the woman doctor from his mate's girlfriend. Blue had driven the girl out here to that woman doctor's house. Because they knew Wade would kill them when he got out of prison. The doctor taking away the baby had nearly killed her anyway. A medical misadventure they called it.

The doctor had slit the girl inside. She'd gone home and taken the painkillers but the pain and the bleeding still made her faint. Blue had taken her back to the doctor's house. *Like a stuck pig*, he told her afterwards. *You were out to it for two days*. Blue had slept in the car in the doctor's driveway. She remembers how kind the doctor's husband was, how she had never seen the woman doctor again.

Blue told her later that the woman doctor had gone bush. When he went back to pick up the van, the husband had begged Blue to go find his wife. So Blue went up into the forest. *She was getting ready to kill herself. She'd shot a deer and cleaned it out even*. When he'd climbed the ridge, there she was with the dead deer and the hawks circling. Blue couldn't believe the woman had shot that deer. A doctor. He had given her the message from her husband, that the girl was alive and would live. The woman was looping a rope around her foot. She was going to tie the other end to the rifle trigger.

The girl thinks of her aborted child, kahukahu, her koro would call it, a germ child with no body to lay down, no heart for the tohunga to place his staff on, no bones to scrape and place in a tree-hollow, nothing to bless and pray over so that child's soul could ascend. Some of her believes these old things, that the child has haunted her and made her life turn out this way. He was a good guy, though, Blue. A good heart.

And even after all that, in the following year, there had been another baby. The girl can't work out how it happened when Blue and her had been real careful. Her parts ache now thinking of it. She wouldn't get rid of the baby. Wanted it. She didn't care any more what Wade would do. Her stitched womb had held him. Held him in. He wanted to be alive that much. Tamati. She wants him. Wants Blue. Wants someone to take a message to him. *I'm sorry, Blueboy. Most of me is dead and the only part alive, the part in my heart that is you, will be dead soon too and I'm going to hold onto our boy until you come.* A shuddering sob comes out of her and she touches Tamati's cheek. She says quietly to Wade, knowing it, *Blue is coming after you.*

Wade hits her in the face with the back of his hand. He has never hit her before today. She doesn't know him now, changed by prison and the drugs and the six years away from her. She pushes the button on the carseat straps.

*Leave him.* Wade shouts and she won't look anymore at his empty crazy eyes. She sobs as she unthreads Tamati's cool arms and takes him onto her lap, his poor head flopping and she has to hold him like he is just born. The road is narrow and turning every way and she pushes herself against the seatback to stop them falling against Wade. Bits of wet cotton and gel leak from Tamati's nappy all over her pants and onto the floor mats. Wade so angry.

They must have passed the doctor's house because the creek is a small river now and the bush is all over the hills and almost down to the road on her side. She doesn't know why she even sees anything outside the window with her boy dead in her lap but it's like her brain is calming itself with that scenery, real, wholesome nature because inside the van everything is battered and wrong.

*Shut the fuck up.*

She will welcome the end of this. She won't beg. Just ask him to bury them touching. Kneel under a tree and let him finish her close up.



She wipes her eyes and looks at her baby. Under the terrible bulge and bruise of his forehead are his perfect eyebrows, his lashes, his lids and she wonders where he is now, her boy, gone out of the cocoon of him, this beautiful body she has loved, she loves. All the pockets and mounds of his skin, his face, mostly his face she loves. And his beating heart and his breathing and every movement, laugh, sound and she is fully weeping now as she holds him against her to warm him and Wade is driving like a maniac and shouting, *Put him back. Put him back in the fucken seat.* Her body will lie with Tamati's body under the leaves forever. She doesn't know where their souls will be.

A yellow sign and Wade smacks her again as he turns the van onto a bridge and from somewhere her own anger riles up and she lunges out and bites into his arm and then rams her elbow backward into his nose. Wade's swearing and blood spattering her. Both his hands off the steering wheel, one holding his nose, the other tangling in her hair. His foot still gunning the engine. And then she sees a man in the road, the shape of a man in the moonlight, and she grabs the wheel, pushes it hard away from her and the van skids and pulls them so they are facing the way they've come and they are still moving. Sideways. Wade pulling on the handbrake. They are jolting down off the road, down past the end of a bridge, hitting it and down, hurtling and scraping through a mess of branches and she has let go of Tamati. He is sucked away by the falling and tossed onto the dashboard, against the windscreen with the leaves thrashing and the air lifting and flipping them forward following the weight of the engine, and her voice screaming in this quickslow time, psycho, their bodies flying against the roof as the van comes out of the trees and lands back on the earth and flips again onto its side. Rolling over. The moon somersaulting. The girl's teeth unclench and she can hear all the van parts and body parts staggered down banging together jaw stickshift mirror cheek passenger door teeth tongue shoulder babyseat glass. Shattering. *He's all right, he's all right.* Wade, yelling his blood everywhere. Tamati running to Wade. *Come back. A bicky if you come.* And the van sliding. Down on its panels down through trees and bracken until it stops hard against a flax bush, her baby's head on the doorframe, the flax's broad arms folding across the windscreen. *Get out.* She feels the windscreen give as her head hits the shattered glass, the plastic film pop around her, her arm tearing on metal, the heat of the exposed engine

as she passes across it and through the parting dark flax down to land. To mud. Her ribs snapping. The splash of them in her chest.

And then time stops freaking about until she is in the time exactly now, lying still. She wants the engine to end so she can hear Tamati who didn't cry out. He is lying so quiet somewhere. Wade has stopped shouting. She doesn't care where he is. Her clothes and skin are unbearable. Wet. She is lying on her stomach in stones and sludge. One of her feet feels like it's floating on water. If she could move her arm she could reach out and touch the bridge, the flax, the river. Wade's blood and her own are in her mouth, and she sighs and vomits thinly into the mud. She is so hurt and tired out, her arm and eyes stinging and she can hardly spit or turn her head. She can't get up to rescue Tamati, can't see him in the weeds or by the loud spinning tyre or above her by the bridge.

I take hold of Hunapo's hand. I can't believe she's still alive, I say. That girl. The hole feels too much like a grave around us. The scar on Hunapo's forehead inflamed.

She's almost not alive. The engine's finally silent. Wade, alive in the moonlight, rises up out of the flax blades and turns to find his bearings. She sees him start to climb up the hill through the tangled shrubs but he stops and shouts, *Honey. Where are you?* He comes towards her. Limping. She stops breathing and closes her eyes so if he finds her body in the silver dark, he will know she is dead. She hears him dragging through the grasses, through the water and he does find her, his fingers are pushing on the side of her neck and wobbling her head and saying, *Honey*. But she is dead. There is nothing left of her. Wade lets out a strange shout and he is stroking her hair, touching her cheek. He tries to pull her out of the mud and even though she has started breathing again, she knows this is death because the pain is exquisite, that is the word she feels, and Wade has to give up pulling because she weighs more than any human can manage.

*God, Honey. You shouldn't a done it. You should a waited for me. I love you more than him.*

Then he moves away from her, to somewhere above her and she hears him crying. She knows what he said is true; they had loved each other more. Blue is kind and fun. She loves him for being simple, his simply being. Blue slops through life like a dog in a field. It's so easy to lie down with him. Not have to think or worry or talk. Just have his dumb arms around her.

But Wade was who she had loved first. Stronger. Dangerous. It's too late for the girl and him. It was too late six years ago.

Wade starts talking to himself. She opens a crack of one eye and sees him go towards the van and after a while he is there sitting up the slope from her in the grass by the flax. The gun is resting on his boot. The tyre has stopped circling now and she can hear the snaps of the cooling engine.

*Not even broken, man.* Wade shakes his head, pleased. He opens his hand and holds up a little bag to the moon behind her head and he shakes it over the pipe and she knows it's the glass he's pleased about. He flicks his lighter and holds it under the bulb. She lies like a stone in the swill of the river and Wade is silent, staring at the wound-up flame, and they could be listening together like lovers to the whirring of the night insects and the water slapping on the mud.

Wade snorts and spits out a clump of black spit. He wipes his face on his sleeve shoulder.

*I bought you that shirt.*

*Why would your mind even think that, when your baby is dead?* This is the moon talking to the girl now. The ripples of it running over the bridge leg. *Tamati tamati tamati* the moon sings. Her ear is underwater. She hears this: *The river is coming to help you.*

She's so brave, that girl, I say, wiping my tears on my t-shirt.

Not brave. She wakes again. Three times she's forgotten Tamati is dead. She imagines if this is her, not really dead by the river but her, having to sleep and wake, sleep and wake until she is an old woman, she will always think in that stupid waking-up instant: *My boy is alive.* She has already felt the paradise of that second and then the cruelty of the next slipping second and every second after that. Hours and days and years to remember without him. Telling you this, she remembers Tamati is dead again and she'll never hear his sparkling voice. She wants his laugh back. Her tears glide into the river.

*I gotta get some clarity. A crash is perfect, babe. This is what I tell the cops. You took the kid out a the carseat when I told you not to.*

Through her eyelashes she sees Wade look over each shoulder take a suck of the pipe.

*I said not to but she didn't listen. I was, you know, Offuckser, distracted, looking at her, arguing and she yanked the wheel out a my hands and spun us over the edge. Yeah, yeah. The kid hits his head on the dash, dead, you go through windshield. Sussed. It was a fuckin terrible accident.*

He smokes some more until the lighter goes out and he swears and tries to spark it but it won't so he throws it. It plops into the river behind her. She hopes she is dissolving from her head down her spine. Wade packs his pipe into its box and puts the gun in his jeans and starts limping around.

The girl thinks, he has got what he thought he wanted. Two birds killed with one stone. One little bird twice in a day.

He stops and grabs a flax leaf to hold himself with his bung leg steady on the hill.

*Shit. No, Honey. That ain't gonna work. You seen those programmes. Them whaddy call it. Forensics. Splatter patterns. No blood from the kid on the dash. The blood on his head is dried up old shit. Ah fuck.*

Wade starts pulling apart grasses and bracken, making another path up to the van.

*You dumb wanker, she wants to yell. Blood doesn't matter. You should be paranoid. Blue is coming. Blue'll tell the cops you stole us and killed us.*

The river is floating her hair over her mouth. Only an ache is keeping her alive. She begins to remember Wade before he turned brutal. His gentle hands all over her and she has to turn the hands into Blue's. The girl must do that much for Blue, poor Blue, before she leaves him.

*There was a man on the road, the moon says to her. She would like to roll over and look at the moon while she is dying.*

When she opens her eye again, there is Wade standing beside her with his boots in the water. The carseat is empty behind him on the mud.

*This is my problem, Wade says, crouching beside Honey. This little fucker. And in his arms the girl has found Tamati.*

Then she hears a voice yelling. Yelling her name. Honey, Honey. But it isn't Wade's voice. Or Blue's.

I get up and help Hunapo to her feet. She pulls herself to the grass and picks up the bone box.

I don't know about the sacred stuff, I call from inside the hole. Tapu and that.

I'm asking you so it's okay. They'll be blessed. His koiwi. It's right to bring them back. To massage his spirit. Our mauri's in our bones. Night, Arlitz.

I wish I could smother her story in dirt. Rescuing Honey is the kind of thing that would make me believe. Believe this body is worth something, show why I'm alive. I can point at real things - not the *absence* of things I've lived with for so long - a mother, a cock, love - the absence of them that have defined me. It's always seemed to me that it's the invisible things that are most important. But now I have my hand on this solidness, something I can give words to. I pick up my spade and punch the earth wall and my hand disappears to my wrist.

## Cave

I pull back and look into the little tunnel my fist has made. A murky light. The humming in my ears is tremendous. Another light moving from the left, bright, and I squint and there is Harvey, in the circle of my vision, just below me, and he stops, puts a torch by his feet and lights a cigarette. It's Harvey all right, on the other side of this dirt wall. Standing in a cave with a cigarette in his mouth. He picks up something behind him. A butterfly net. The humming is coming from the roots and crumbling clay around him. So loud, it must be a massive colony of bees. Harvey waves the net around. I nearly call out to him there inside the hill but I see him taking a bee from his net and holding it against his chest. Asking it to sting him. Ouch, he says and then he picks up his torch and walks out of view. I make the opening into a gash but it's too dark to see.

I sit on the bottom of the hole and realise it's started to rain. I also realise it's a miracle I've been digging at the edge of a cave and only a thin wall of earth is holding me up. But then the earth can no longer take my weight and I'm falling.

## Bees

A fine spit of rain on me. I'm lying on my back. I look up at the ripped dome of yellow-grey sky where I fell from Furry Moyra. The remains of the cave ceiling is held together with scrawling roots, plants sending their divining tendrils far into the air. The rain stirs the elemental smells of pottery, must, wax. I taste metal. A patrol of bees comes to inspect my disturbance. I lie still, hurting from my fall. Hives, like plates of fungus, stick out of the cave walls, marking the entrances to tunnels where I can hear a million more bees humming and crawling. I feel their percussion in my bones. And the sound that has accompanied me my entire life - the muted, hollow thrum of underwater and underground. If I broke off a hunk of clay from the roof, I'd expose the wild hive. I have this strange sensation of knowing exactly what it looks like inside, all the tunnels and cells, as if I've walked along the chambers myself. A maze of insects in full life, wings, legs, antennae. Pupae, fat and gestating. And somewhere in there, a queen, being waited on by drones and workers. It's as if I have a memory of being inside a compartment where a queen lay, once. A memory of being inside *her*.

I sit up and shake dirt out of my clothes. A bee lands on my hand and hooks its sting into me. I think of the urologist's needles. His cigarettes. Then I think of how you used to drip hot paraffin on me and how I felt only love. I bite out the poison bulb and spit it on the ground. Cry a little. Bees dance around me. To my left, a set of steps cut out of the dirt with a door at the top of them. In the opposite direction is daylight. I walk that way.

## Boy

The cave opens out on the hill between the bushline and Harvey's house. A rope is attached to a post and I heave myself onto the grass. Strangely, the sun is up. Clear sky. At the corner of the house I stop and look down the slope of the hill. I can make out the weeping willows at the bottom but I can't see Furry Moyra at all. I think I might have come out on the opposite side so I retrace my steps but there's only the back of the house

and plains slipping away to the sea. I feel dizzy. I walk around to the front again. Onto the verandah. Above Harvey's door is a plaque with an etching of a bee and the words *Te Kohanga Pi*. I lean against the weatherboards and slide along until my shoulder is against the first window frame. Turn my head and look into a room.

Two single beds. One unmade, one tidy. Things suspended from the ceiling. Grasses and a pyramid made from ice-block sticks. A wire moth I've seen before. A man and a woman are eating breakfast. The man is Harvey. The woman could be Miriam. Also my grandmother, Lilian. She's staring straight at me but seems not to notice me. Even if she does see me I can tell she's incapable of reacting. She's got on a towelling bib and her hands clench rolled flannels. She opens her mouth automatically for the spoon. Her legs, purple sticks.

I watch for a while, concentrating on getting my breath, Harvey's patience, the repetitive dip and scrape and tip and wipe of the spoon. Harvey touches my grandmother's mouth to centre the spoon, as he feeds her.

I feel sick. It's not the bee-sting; the pain has disappeared, only a reddish welt below my knuckle. I move along the deck to the French doors and look between two half-drawn curtains into a second room.

In a hospital bed is a boy. Perhaps a teenager. I tap on the glass. The boy sits up suddenly. His eyes are closed. Taped to his face and going into his nostril, a tube. A chime goes off. A woman runs into the room and goes to the boy, holds his head and presses his shoulder, lies him down, and she calls out *Harvey!*

I don't understand. I think, That's me. The boy is me. I see the boy in the bed is myself. I don't understand. Also me? I've come through the bee cave from Furry Moyra and possibly Miriam has too. Are Hunapo and Ilya here, also? Different and sick? Younger? Or else, if the boy in the bed, that Arlitz, is real, what then am I? Where am I? Doing my head in, I think. Am I my own imagination? It doesn't feel like a dream. An out-of-body experience. I pinch the top of my hand where the sting went in and it burns. Harvey comes into this room and looks at the boy in the bed, nods as the woman says something to him and then he leaves. The woman approaches the window. She is the one I've seen from Furry Moyra smoking on Harvey's verandah. A nurse, then. I press myself to the weatherboards beside the door frame as she pulls open the curtains and looks into

the distance. I don't know why I hide from the woman. But I have an idea that even if I jump out and cavort madly in front of her, she won't see me. I'm not willing to take that chance. The chance of not being observed. The chance of this body not existing. That would be horrifying. She's seeing daylight out here, I think. Her view of this side of the window is another world altogether, as mine is. Her sun coming up as mine dips behind the hill. Am I seeing reality behind the window? This Arlitz, a boy, my young self. Is Furry Moyra the future? This place the past? I taste my fillings; all my functions are magnified - swallowing, breathing, I want to explain all this. I remember the separateness of my body and my mind, my inarticulateness, my inability to say what anything means. I watch the woman through the window, who is beautiful, not like Hunapo is, but in a pale, doll-like way. She turns the Arlitz in the room and folds down the blanket that covers him and begins to wash him from a steel dish. It reminds me of the bowl I once slept in, turning my face from the water it contained, breathing in a rhythm dictated by the slowness of sleep and the self-preservation of my boy heart, lungs, brain. Ba-doom. Reptilian, cetaceous, human. The woman moves away and I look at myself, at the body I should recognise, the fine-boned face, the long neck, the chest, the muscles of his tapering abdomen. Below the waist, I see the boy intact. The nurse drying him with a muslin cloth. . I dare to put my forehead on the glass. It looks real. Why would it not. The boy's manhood. I look real. I look at my own hand and whisper, This is my hand, this is my arm. The boy in the bed shouts nonsense words. Yo, huh, pih. Sit up, I think. Arlitz. The Arlitz in the bed sits up again and opens his eyes. Looks at me. I see on the wall behind his head something I recognise. A crumpled piece of paper in the shape of a horn, pinned out so I can see those black words I wrote to you, about you, about us, long ago. Or not long ago, who can say. Nonsense sentences now. ***Let life cut and buffet you - for as long as it takes - keep choosing - vast the world inside us - All the happiness - only been moving closer to this, this echoless point.***

I wonder if you came back and found the manacles empty and read my story and wondered what words were missing. And regretted my loss. The words, I have to say, were not important. But you didn't, did you? Come back?



I lean against Harvey's house and look down at Furry Moyra that isn't there and I remember the night you left me. I was listening to the strangled, crying breath of the fat girl under you.

## Girl

When I hear the girl choking I crawl out from under the bed. You are kneeling on her chest with your hands around her throat. Stop it, I say, but you're high on something. I pull your leg and you kick me. Master, please. The girl's eyes are stupid and terrified. Popping. Her mouth gulping. You fold the pillow over her face. I put my leg chain over your head and tighten it. Jerk you sideways. You flip off the bed and there's a crack and you are lying with your ear against the nightstand.

The girl is coughing and breathing again and saying, Please don't hurt me.

Get dressed, I say.

I lift the bed leg and slip the chain from under it. Turn on the light and find a paper clip on the dresser and unfasten my restraints. I move your head and see your blood on the skirting board, pooling on the floor. Your eyes are open. The girl is snuffling and picking up her underwear.

Is he dead? Her words slurry from the drug.

He's fine. I push down your eyelids.

Where are your clothes? she says, focussing for a moment. God, what happened to you? We need to get the police.

No. It's all right. Hurry. Go up to the hospital. Get a taxi. Forget everything. I'll fix it.

God, thank you, she says, reaching a hand towards my crotch but then placing it instead against her strikingly marked throat.

She pulls on her dress and staggers out and I wait until I hear the front door shut. She has left her shoes. I borrow your clothes, your shoes. I take your black Sharpie from the dresser and write until my wrist is aching. I write around you, over the fleur de lis

walls, the slick stain, listening for your breath that won't come again. I write this story and many others. When the sun comes up, I tear off a horn of wallpaper and put it in my pocket. I walk down the stairs and go out into the rain.

## Sting

The nurse is drying my young body so gently. We look at each other, new Arlitz and old. I feel old. Weak, like I'm at the bottom of a diving pool and my breath is running out and I know I have to get back to Furry Moyra. Run back through the bee cave and draw the air into my lungs. The air breathed by my friends. *My friends!* I put my palm on the window for a second and then I leave my other self. I find the cave at the edge of the bush. Walk into the gloom and the bee sentries smell me and gather. I walk quickly, tree roots flicking my hair, the bees whipping around me. Before I can blink, a bee sacrifices herself. This time in the globe of my eye, her venom sac ripping from her as her sting enters my cornea. Into the grey wash of my iris. I tear at my eyelid, crushing the bulb, the little barb leaking its toxin into tenderness. Close to the worst pain I've ever felt. I'm blinded and yelling for help. I crawl up the clay steps and push open the trapdoor. Lunge through. Gym mats and orange cones and a net filled with soccer balls. I'm in the storage room. Back inside Furry Moyra.

Ilya holds me down and removes the sting with tweezers but all the poison has diffused. Hunapo puts a handful of grass on my eye.

Plantain and parsley, she says.

I had a weird dream, I say. The neurotoxins course around my body. I drink a potion that makes me sleep.

In a week, when I'm feeling better and my face is unswollen, I write all this down. I look at it and know I wasn't dreaming. Harvey meets with me in his study.

I was in a hospital bed, Harv. You were there. And Miriam. And a nurse.

Her name is Nina.

I thought so.

There's a reciprocal wave, Arlitz, which goes between the future and the present. The future has an observation and sends back a question and the past reorganises itself to make that observation true.

If you say so. Someone told me there are paths into our other lives. The unconscious and the nearly dead have a way in. I think I was stuck for a while. I don't think I want to be nearly dead anymore.

Good.

What does that sign above your front door say?

Te Kohanga Pi? The Bees' Nest.

Makes sense. I'm going to leave, Harv. I have things to do in this life. You know, stories to rewrite. The future waiting behind me, as Hunapo says.

Yes. It's all I hoped for.

## Leaving

I go down the garden, past my excavation that is covered with a sheet of plywood, and roped off. In the barn, Ilya's coffin is standing on its end, the lid hinged and latched, the wood now white and black and grey. Each small painting is perfect. The leaping animals and the snow. Next to a man on the rings is a tree with two trunks and under that an ice-skating figure. Ilya is working on her boot with a tiny paintbrush. The skater has Nina's face.

You've made a good thing, I tell Ilya. I mean, it's fantastic.

I'm glad you like it, says Miriam. She is cutting the deerhide to fit her basket. The rows of the woven lid are threaded with wild flowers. Dandelions. Who punched your eye, Arlitz?

A bee. Has anyone seen Hunapo?

Bees are the symbol of the resurrection. My son-in-law told me that. He's dead now. Leukaemia. Dinks knows a lot about bees.

He does.

My red box is under Ilya's rings. I think he's been using it to stand on.

I find Hunapo in the bush, singing her sadness to the trees. I'm going soon, I say. That's a totara. I can smell it from here.

Miro, dummy. Hunapo laughs and grabs my hands. I'm looking for a place for Tamati, she says. To return him to the earth. He'll like it here.

I know where there's a cave. He'd be safe in there.

Your eye looks okay now.

Thanks for saving me.

Nah. Doubt it. You're gonna save me.

The inmates sit at the dining table and eat bacon-and-egg pie and green beans and Ilya's potatoes, mashed. I think about the stories I've heard. Imagined in the heads of ordinary people who've led ordinary lives. Everyday ordinary life is extraordinary I think. We're not really a pity after all.

Miriam says, You know, I think Harvey expected some of our pain would get transferred to the coffins and then we'd bury them with all our bad memories and then they'd be gone. But I'm keeping mine.

I reckon the coffins need to be displayed. They're outstanding. Works of art. Not mine, though. I didn't put my heart into it.

You put your heart into a hole instead, says Ilya.

Ha-ha, I say, but the Siberian is right.

After Writing-time we say goodnight and adjourn to our rooms. I get a black Sharpie and write one more line. On the wallpaper inside my wardrobe, a sentence that just comes into my head: ***I exist because you believe in me.*** I put on a pair of chinos and a jacket and the yellow trainers I don't remember owning, open my window and climb out. Now I've discovered the truth, there's nothing to hold me. The boy in the bed was me. *Is* me. If this is the truth, I could cast myself off. I've been released from the bonds of my body. That life. Having to live that life. Or else this one.

The sunset is blue and red and gold, liquefying the sky above Furry Moyra, the twilight running through me. Crepuscular is the word I think of but that reminds me more of hospitals than of twilight and I don't want to think about hospitals or patients any

more. I'm impatient now. An impatien. I put the bottle of Honey's remedy in my pocket and take off down the garden.

Past the wreckage of my digging that was not a hole or a grave but an admission. Past the deadly brugmansia. I look among the decayed trumpets but there are no more pods. Everything is designed to kill us. Past clumps of arum lilies and irises. The agapanthus leaves that multiply. Past the nightshade along the borders. Everywhere, toxic plants. The toadstools growing at the edge of the compost bin could destroy nerves. I kick them off their stalks, flip them on to their frilly hoods and fluster the pattern of hens making their way up the hill to roost. Wish me luck, Miss Lays I say. If I chewed on the bark of the willows at the road, my blood would pour out unhindered. Like yours, your skull cracked. Still I write to you. Who knows what life you're living at any moment. I put my shoe on the bottom fencewire and swing myself over. Stand on the driveway that winds up to Harvey's house. I wonder what's happening to the Arlitz in the bed up there. What will happen to me or to him as I move further away from the boy that might be me? I hope for him one thing. That he never meets you.

I figure, if I keep heading south, the lane must meet the highway. I follow the creek ditch, my trainers bright in the twilight. At the bend, I look back at my home, my *home*, the first time I've called it that, and there's a spasm in my chest. Furry Moyra is jutting out of the black hill and the homestead's lights are levitating above it. I wonder if anyone glancing from the kitchen window high up there would notice my yellow shoes walking away from them. Taking me, this Arlitz, without anger or fear along the road to the man who killed Hunapo's son.

## Bridge

The red edge of the sky has flared to gold and then faded to milky yellow. There are power lines along the road but no streetlights. I can still see the way I'm going. I can see the road. And my shoes and the cuffs of my chinos flecked with grass seeds and dusted-up from the roadside gravel. I've been walking for forty minutes between the creekbank and the broken edge of the tarseal, in a line that springs out and then coils back before taking off again the way it should be headed, following the bush-covered hills and valleys to my left and now falling away on my right as the creek has dug itself down into the paddocks and widened. The creek gushes along beside me. Up ahead, the wire fences turn to flax and scrub. The creekbed drops further and fills out and then the water folds backwards as it takes a hard turn into a river. *Waineke* the bridge sign reads.

I spend a while on the bridge looking down at the river's slow trawl. Behind me it twists inland over flat scrubland into the forest. I see this must be the delta, an estuary deep enough that the mangroves in the middle of it are just keeping their breath above water and I figure the channel will run deep even after the tide tries to empty it. The tide is coming in. I find I've stopped my own breath and I let it out quickly through my mouth. The cool air showing no trace of me.

The bridge support rises out of the mudflat that will soon be covered with river and sea. It's so quiet I think I can hear the popping bubbles of fish breathing in the mangroves. The light on the horizon is draining away. Caught in the river is the full moon. It could be my reflected face down there, washing among the salt-leaves. I'm surprised that I'm not frightened, standing so still and high-up above the dark water. A memory leaps up at me.

I'm on another bridge. A hundred yards from your apartment. Two arcs and three legs straddling a graveyard and a motorway. Among the trees are the remains of settlers and missionaries, and my flesh in a zip-lock bag. I was wishing you'd follow me and call to me as I sat on the rib of the glass suicide barrier, perched above the first abutment. But your blood is congealing on the wall and floor. It's raining, a light spring drizzle.

I hope the last thing my brain knows before all my memories are gone is the falling. Although I don't consider the flash of agony on landing a worse option than continuing to live. I think I can tolerate the few seconds of the sensation in my nerves at breaking point if it means an end to this sadness. I think: This should be so easy. For a murderer to step out into space. But I recall something I've read - that jumpers always have regret upon leaving solid ground. There is no turning back. Like the pang of regret after a tattoo, the realisation of the permanence of ink. The permanence of the act. The permanence of death. I slip back to the footpath and walk to the motorway on-ramp. When the traffic starts, I hitch a ride to the country, to my grandparents' house.

I pull away from the rail, zip up my jacket and squint towards where the sea must be. Watch the bright moon on its climb through a brush of low clouds. Then I hear a car.

It's coming from the distance behind me. I can't see it yet. Perhaps it's been driven all afternoon from the top of the island where I have never been, the leaping-off place. I've counted maybe ten cars a day on this road. Watched for them from my bedroom. Hoped for the movement of one. I think about asking for a lift when it comes, decide I will. I'll put out my arm and wave down the driver. Ask for a ride to the highway at least.

*I've climbed over the fence and walked this far.* I say this aloud to the travelling river and the moon that waxing or waning, I don't know which. The bush leans towards me from the hill and I'm glad the moon is its whole self.

I walk along the bridge, waiting for the car to catch up to me. At the end of the guard rail I stop and cross the road. I kick at a clump of speargrass and draw arcs with my soles in the side-gravel so the black hills behind me and the blackness ahead of me will think I'm nonchalant. Reckless, even. I had planned to walk all night but my shins are already sore. Legs only accustomed to moving from room to room. Once I walked up the side of a mountain through a forest. I wonder if this is how a prisoner feels on his first day free and alone. The world somehow too much for him.

I wonder what the others are doing now. Perhaps they're looking out from their dark windows down to the creek I followed, thinking I might appear from behind the



willows that will draw apart their abject arms so I can wade through the mud between them and back to Furry Moyra.

Where have you been? Ilya and Miriam cry.

I went to kill a man.

I smile at how that would be. How that would have been. It is almost a memory already.

The night is settling in. Only the car engine whine and a couple of leftover crickets trilling. The tarseal vibrates and here it is now, turning onto the bridge. But not a car at all, a van, just one headlamp lit and its body swaying on its axles. I step into the middle of the road and put out my arm. Then I realises the van is travelling very fast and that it is too dark and that the driver cannot see me.

## Accident

I throw myself into the ditch as the van swerves away from me and I lift up my head to watch it catch in a slide of gravel and spin until it's turned a half circle and is facing the way it's come. But it doesn't stop because its rear tyre catches on the tarseal lip and slips over it and buckles and seems to pull the rest of the van with it over the edge. The van tips sideways and I'm suddenly looking at its chassis. The front bumper clips the rail end and takes out the yellow square with the bridge number painted on it before it flips its length and the whole long white body of the van falls away from the road, revving through the scrub, disappearing into the leaves that spring back so it seems the flax and vines, the griselinias and cabbage trees have swallowed it. I hear the crack of glass and the slide of the van's roof over the trees. A faint shouting and a woman crying out. And then a thudding stop. I hear the sickening sounds of the bits I don't see while I'm picking himself off the road. I've miraculously leapt into the gravel and weeds as the van drove at me. I touch my face with my torn-up hands and get to my feet and press my palms on my chinos and wipe the dirt and blood out of my mouth. Adrenaline makes everything painless. I can run. I lean over the bridge rail. The hulk of the van is stopped just short of the river, resting on two wheels against a big flax bush, its roof stoved in and its back door open and two ungrounded wheels still spinning. The engine cuts out and the headlamp is gone. Someone is trying to climb out of the driver door, pushing it upwards like a trapdoor and I'm about to call down, Are you all right? but I see a hand come out of the door and the moon shows me clearly the hand has a gun in it. Then the door slams back and a boot appears through the gap in the windscreen, kicking away the sagging safety film. A man writhes out and drops over the bonnet into the flax. Fuck, Wade says distinctly.

I run back to the place the van went over, the vegetation dense so I can't see a way through. I run to the other side of the road and climb through the long grass. There is only flax and hebes and a few sparse trees on this side and I push down until I'm at the water. The smell of sewage and exhaust fumes. I work my way along the bridge support, my shoes truly ruined now in the mud and I stand shivering at the end of the concrete face and watch Wade trying to find his way up through the undergrowth. The trees and

flax are a jungle reaching almost down to the mud. Wade shouts, Where are you? And I have to stop myself shouting, Here I am! I see he's dragging his left leg as he turns this way and that, scanning the bank. I stand silent under the bridge and figure out how I'm going to get poison down Wade's throat. Then I pass out or something from shock because, next thing I know, I'm lying on the mud.

I get up slowly, gummed and stinking, and see another man storming down through the scrub towards Wade. Crashing like a stag through the trees. Carrying a shovel. Wade throws something. It lofts over the river and into the bush. The tumbling arc of it. A carseat. The looming trees suck it in and close over it. Then he throws a second time. Towards the sea. A splash in the deep part of the channel.

The man is hitting Wade in the head with the shovel and a gunshot echoes under the bridge and I lie flat again in the mud. The man falls with Wade at the edge of the river.

After the silence, I crawl out. The man is Blue. Shot in the chest. Wade's head is caved in. The brothers lying together, their dead limbs resting heavy on each other. The gun.

And there she is. Her hair like black seaweed, the moon lighting up her stillness. I grab her shirt and lift her out of the water and up to the grass. She tries to open her eyes. Honey, I say, folding the grass stalks over her like a quilt. I put my jacket on top of her and I can see her pain is immense. Tamati, she whispers. Stay here, I say, as if she could do anything else. Tamati is in the middle of the river, I know. Then I think, a gun has gone off so someone might come. There are probably houses up ahead. But then I think, there is also a forest and the people are used to the sound of a bullet. Three dead bodies in a night and another if I don't get Honey warm.

Help me, she says, her lips not moving. Bottle.

I take the bottle out of my pocket. It's done, I say. Wade's already dead.

But then I see she means for me to pour the contents into her mouth. I open the lid and empty the poison into the grass. Throw the bottle into the river. I kneel and tell her, apologise, I will have to get her up to the road and I begin to lift her waterlogged body and I don't know how I'll do it but I manage to half-drag her along the matted

kikuyu and flax and under the bridge. She cries out once but then she loses consciousness. Through the clotted mud. Up the bank. Stopping and starting. Pressing my grazed hands together to stop them hurting. Checking the pulse in her neck. Her breath. Using the strength I have from knowing I've been through more shit than anyone. Anyone but Honey. Thankful for the muscles that digging has given me. I lift Honey onto the back seat of Blue's car.

I drove a car once, long ago, and I do it again. Drive up the lime rock driveway to Te Kohanga Pi where sun is lighting the windows and a nurse is waiting beside a boy in a bed. I put Honey on the verandah and knock on the door with the bee above it.

Grandpa, this is Honey. Then I leave them and drive back to the river.

I'm very cold. I stride out by the place where the brothers are fallen, the Waineke now sinking their bodies. I think, it's not fair there's a baby in my story, a dead baby who didn't harm anyone. I take five quick gasps and then fill my lungs and dive. I swim for half a minute under water to the place I've figured. I'll move towards the bridge from there, calculating the push of the tide. I dive. All the cetaceous instincts of my boyhood kick in. Gills open for me, my lungs don't struggle, oxygen sits in my cells and swells them. The water is moving and salty and oily dark. I pull myself along the stones, careful not to stir up too much mud although the incoming sea and the mangroves have made the water brackish. My overblown breast stroke startles a big mullet that startles me. I trawl across and return the breadth of the channel, dreading the moment I'll touch something human. Back and forth without surfacing. On my fourth pass, I find the baby. Grab hold of his t-shirt and lift to take a breath, hauling the metal weight Wade has fixed to him. We go down again. I kick along the bottom of the river to the shore. Lay Tamati and his anchor under the moon, a seal in the grass. I start to shake violently then, from cold and shock and sadness. In my next life, I will live with Honey. A sweet life. We'll be in the same house, often in the same room. We'll lie together at night, feed each other, read to each other, watch TV together and laugh a lot. We'll forget sadness, not permit it to enter our house. I unscrew the wheel jack from the baby's foot.

## Voices

*Arlitz, I said. We've been waiting for you. I took him into the lounge. Of course, he hadn't seen his grandmother for years. He was shocked. Lilian sitting there rigid with that god-awful doll on her lap. He said to me: The police are probably looking for me.*

*I made him a cup of tea and he told me he'd strangled his lover with a chain that he'd been tied up to a bed with. Good god. What was I supposed to say? 'That's a terrible story. Let's try and rewrite that together.'? Perhaps. What I said was, How much do you weigh? I took him to the garage and showed him my flying platform. I asked him to help me. Help Lilian return.*

How can you be talking about this boy? He's blinking much more. Turning to look at you. We're waiting for you, handsome one.

*Listen, Nina. I told him about time being an endless ribbon, like a twisted ellipse. How he could fly into the loop of the past then return where the ribbon strands cross at the present. I warned him about not flying near cities, about not taking anything that might fall and cause disruptions in the continuum. You'll need stamina, I said. You'll have to travel for a long time. Seemingly.*

*So I'd come back younger, he said.*

*Yes. The police would never be able to charge you.*

*And I'll remember how things are? Were?*

*Mostly.*

*All right, he said. When do we do it?*

*I let him practise for a minute, get the hang of hovering and turning. I told him about the insect preserve. I was so grateful to him.*

You should tell him that.

*I'm so grateful to you, Arlitz.*

Did you see his lips flicker?

*I wrote in my notebook what we intended to do. We went to the insect preserve the next morning. I told you about it.*

Yes.

*I put Lilian and the machine in my garden handcart and pushed it through the forest. Arlitz' face lit up when he saw the meadow. He went leaping through the grass like a fawn.*

*Keep talking to her until she starts speaking. Then return quickly, I said. Don't stay up too long. You'll get very tired. I thought how fragile he looked, standing astride the stool, his thin arms around his grandmother. He's always been delicate. I slipped the doll from Lilian's lap and kissed her and said, See you soon. They hovered, then disappeared.*

*I lay back in the grass. Lilian's doll beside me, shut-eyed and open-mouthed. A disc of light skipped between two clouds. I waited. I re-checked my watch. Ten minutes. I got up and paced around the meadow border, sending up flurries of insects. I scanned the sky. I had a terrible thought. I hadn't warned Arlitz about the bee galleries, hadn't forbidden him to fly over them. What if he and Lilian had come down in the pond, the deadly algae? I picked up the doll by the hair and shook it so its eyelids clattered. Then, I held it like a shield and pushed through the ti-tree hedge. At the edge of the cliff, the doll's arm caught fast in the crook of a branch and I was flung outwards, falling. I landed on the spongy clay below. The disturbed bees swarmed out of their tunnels, out over the acid pond.*

*When I woke up, I felt as if I'd been crushed. I had to take great gulping breaths and summon spit to purge the taste of rust. I'd been stupid. There was nothing to say my wife and Arlitz had flown into the pond. It took all my will to drag myself up. I focussed on the white body in the scrub above me - Lilian's doll hanging by its hand. My head ached and I was shivering. As I stepped through the ti-tree, gravity lifted off me. The meadow was gone. Gone. All the straw-grass sea, its bright, scattered petals ploughed into dirt. Each singular creature, its undiscovered secrets, erased. I sat on the rutted dirt and vomited. Two men were leaning against a digger parked behind a truck. Behind them, a path clear-cut through the trees. I stumbled over the furrows towards them. They were drinking coffee and studying a hole, like a bullet hole, charred through the digger's windscreen.*

*Have you seen a woman and a boy? I said.*

*No, mate, sorry. Are you okay?*

*I asked for a drink. One of the men tipped out his mug and refilled it. I gulped the coffee. Scalded my throat. I indicated Lilian's slipper on the truck bed and they said, Take it. I thanked them and walked into the forest, turning back to ask, What's the date?*

*The twenty-sixth.*

*Two days since Arlitz and Lilian had flown.*

*But you found them.*

*I found Lilian first. She was at home. Arlitz had hovered over our garden. As soon as Lilian jumped onto the lawn he took off again. He was having too much fun. He lost control of the machine at this age. We think fourteen. He was always small. We found him in the hospital, Intensive Care. Comatose. He'd crashed into a hill.*

*And Lilian was fine?*

*She was sitting in her chair her past-face shining with tears. About five years younger, I guessed. The first thing she said to me was, What's the time, Harvey? It was all I'd pretended to hope for. Then she said, Darling, I've been ill, haven't I? I knelt down and put my head in her lap and sobbed my heart out.*

*She said, Harvey, it's all right. Something's happened. I've forgotten things. I had a dream I was flying. On your machine. I was tied to the pole and someone was holding me, a young man, and we were flying over the hills, in the country, following the road home. I said, I'd like to go down now and he said the strangest thing. I'm getting your mind back, Lilian. He was laughing and then we were going straight up, into the clouds. We flew up until we could hardly breathe. He looked like Arlitz.*

*For two months, she nursed Arlitz. Then, another stroke hit her. Cruel. I'm glad I found you, Nina. I don't know what I'd do without you.*

*I was looking for you, Harvey. For Arlitz. What about the bees?*

*As soon as I could, I went back to the hive. The bulldozers hadn't yet destroyed it. I captured a new queen. A swarm. Set them up here in the cave. They thrived. Then, the miracle, my first sting. The way into Te Whare Moera. Arlitz calls it Furry Moyra.*

*Do you, Arlitz? I hope we can talk soon. You can tell me about flying. I think you'll make me laugh.*

## Morning

There are two policemen at the end of my bed. I hear Harvey's voice say, A vegetative state. This is Mrs Svoboda, his nurse.

Just Nina.

Nina's voice. What is Nina doing here? I wonder. I feel I've been asleep for a week. Light, as if I've had my mouth open all night and gorged on air.

One of the policemen waves a pen in front of my face. I seem to have blown a spit bubble.

Notice anything out of the ordinary last night or early this morning, Nina?

Only the car.

Right. We'll need to take a look in the other rooms, Mr Dinky. Nobody seems to be hiding here. We've checked your garage. If you see anything out of the ordinary give us a ring. Keep your doors locked. Thanks, Nina.

You're welcome. Goodbye.

I move my arm out from under the sheet and pick at the tape on my face. Furry Moyra, I say. A chime goes off and I jump.

Holy Mother! Arlitz? Shh. I'm turning off the noise. Can you see me?

Are you real? My throat hurts.

Yes. My name is Nina. I've been looking after you.

I know. Where are the patiens? Can you get this tube out of my nose? Where's my room?

This is your room.

I better get up.

Hush. Soon, when the police have gone.

Nina pulls back the curtain and I see what I already know. I'm inside Harvey's house. The bed with rails. A verandah. High up. Familiar hills. I watch the policemen walk down the driveway. Nina watches me.

Did they come for me?

No, no. There was an accident at the bridge.

Some people died.



Yes, they did. That's one of the cars down there. Don't worry. It's all right. Let me look at you. You're miraculous. She smooths my forehead and feels for my pulse.

On the lane, I see the policemen talking to the towie who is winching Blue's car onto his truck.

You've had quite a sleep. Your grandfather will be thrilled to see you.

I was dreaming.

Harvey calls from outside. Nina!

I won't be long, Arlitz. There's a woman from the accident. Hidden in the bush. Stay still. I'll help you get up in a minute. Let's give Harvey a surprise.

I touch my head and feel hair. The scar under it. I flip back the sheet and look down at my bare chest. Pads and wires. The dents in my ribs are there. The scars on my stomach and hip. Everything I remember but not exactly the same. I'm smaller. My arms are twigs. Where is my tattoo? The plastic tube is there but it's attached to a dick. An actual dick. My dick. My manhood. Whole. My *boyhood*. I look at my unharmed self. Cup the young parts I thought I would never hold again. I pull up the sheet and stare at the white ceiling and cradle myself until I hear Harvey saying, Gently.

He and Nina are carrying a stretcher with Honey on it. They lift her bandaged body onto the bed opposite me in the big white room with the sunlight filtering in. I feel so warm. When Honey wakes, she won't recognise me. I'll tell her, Your baby's bones are safe. Guarded by bees, underground.

I think Honey could be the good thing that's due to happen to Arlitz, Harvey says. The good thing that will make him wake up and get well again.

Harvey. Nina takes his arm. I have a surprise. It's already happened.

Life is a ribbon, I think that's what Harv said. An endless ribbon that twists back on itself. You can restart your life anywhere.

Nina nods at me. I turn my head and look into my grandfather's face.

Now, I say.

## **RIGHTING THE SELF: AN EXEGESIS TO *ARLITZ***

### **Introduction**

*Righting The Self* is my exegesis accompanying the thesis, *Arlitz*, a first draft of my psychological novel that examines the lives of characters who are housed in a rehabilitation facility. The titular character exists in two places and the shared stories he hears help him to navigate back from coma to the real world. My novel examines how the stories we tell and receive about ourselves can confine or free us and ultimately help us make sense of being human.

Reflecting on my creative work and practice, I discovered recurring themes and symbols that spoke of an unconscious mind transforming life into literature. I asked, why, disturbingly, had I written my characters trapped and scarred? What deep identification did I have with the desires of a comatose and emasculated protagonist? What did the small voice inside me want to know?

Through self-analysis I came to see that, like me, my characters were seeking escape from their pasts. I was writing about how humans can survive adversity, dig through to the story where they can live the best possible lives. I was voicing the desire of restoration and wellness.

My exegesis sets my novel in the context of psychological fiction that is born out of the writers' subconscious process of rewriting trauma in their own lives. I wanted to discover if experiences of trauma or illness influenced other writers' creative thematic choices and if rewriting facets of those challenging episodes led them to find meaning and/or healing.

Writer Gerard Donovan in his speech at the opening of the West Cork Literary Festival 2006 and the launch of the *Fish Anthology* said:

I want to believe that the writer's vocation is to record, to be an unrelenting observer of the human act of living, and in a crafted manner to measure those (long, dark) spaces, expose them, celebrate them.

The best stories create an art that is intimate and universal at the same time. A story of one family seeking asylum becomes the story of all who seek better lives, even in their own country and without leaving port. Craft alone won't do it. Sooner or later you have to leave the dialogue and plot and setting behind and trust yourself to tell a story of the human heart, which means eventually exposing your own. And yet craft can produce wonders (Cairns, 2006).

My story of one family seeking asylum was *Grandmother, Girl, Wolf*, (Cairns, 2006) and it was awarded the Fish Short Story Prize that year. The story continued to play in the back of my mind for seven years and finally became the basis for *Arlitz*.

I spent much of 2008 in a haematology ward with leukaemia where I became an unrelenting observer of the human act of living. I had a small cartoon fireman resident inside my chest. My ribs were the walls of his station, my heart beat above his head. The fireman manned three hoses. When I was rigorous with fever, he employed the white hose to cool me with water. The red hose replenished my failing blood cells. The purple hose gave my veins an extra drenching of chemotherapeutic drugs. The fireman had no name - he was simply the hero I put inside me, the soot-covered champion who showed up for work each day. When I was wondering "How the hell did this happen to me?" and "I don't actually want to be in this story", the fireman told me: "Get on with it. You're going to live." He was the narrator of a story I, the possibly-dying author, was inventing, and I have no doubt the fireman helped me recover. What I learned later was that I could choose to remember the traumatic event of leukaemia in a positive way. The idea of story

as a mode of healing interested me and I thought about how I could celebrate the “long dark spaces”.

I am always mindful of Gerard Donovan’s words when I sit at my desk in that moment before exposing my heart and consider what is at the core of my desire to write. It is the wanting to tell a universal yet intimate story of the human heart and it is the love of crafting the words to form that story. The event of illness or trauma is a time when a person has opportunity to reflect on what it means to be human. I was not cognitively capable of sublimating my pain through writing at the time of the event but story was developing on a subconscious level - images were forming that would become metaphoric: blood, scars, winter, imprisonment. I submit that the crafting of my novel is the result of restorying my internalised experience of a life-threatening illness.

I entered the MCW programme with the concept of writing a novel about immigrants and their story of displacement, begun in *Grandmother, Girl, Wolf* (Cairns, 2006) but the seeds of an illness narrative were already planted in the voice of a character named Arlitz, speaking to me out of the consciousness of a coma, telling his story despite the constraints of the physical body. I wrote Arlitz’s story heuristically, letting him explore his own path, and went on to compose five other wounded characters’ narratives. The epistolary style and the fragmented and complex structure of the novel are evidence of this heuristic approach.

In *Arlitz*, the introduction of a therapist as a character was initially a structural necessity. Perhaps resonating with my unconscious restorying agenda, researching possible modes of psychology led me to the choice of a narrative therapist who, as a device, could tie together the characters’ disparate stories.

Harvey Dinky wants to help his patients recover from their traumas using Narrative Therapy - recalling their pasts and re-writing them to make new and hopeful stories. Reluctant to talk, Arlitz, Miriam, Ilya and Hunapo agree to write their histories as letters to family members.

Harvey returns every night through a cave of bees to the house on the hill above Furry Moyra. There, a nurse, Nina, cares for his young grandson who lies in a vegetative state after falling from a flying platform.

Despite his passivity and his reluctance to exist in the real world, Arlitz decides to dig a hole. This gives Ilya the idea of building a coffin and soon other inmates are making repositories for bones. Distracted by their shared creativity the inmates begin to reveal the content of their letters and their personal stories unfold.

My exegesis looks at Narrative Therapy as it relates to me as a writer influenced by a life-changing episode in my own narrative and defines my contention that writing a psychological novel is a form of Narrative Therapy.

It looks at the conditions of illness and trauma and forms an analysis of my methodology as it relates to creating a work with deliberate attention to the intricacies of craft using the landscapes of body, mind and setting as modes to investigate recurrent themes and symbols in the narrative. It focuses on two contemporary texts in the psychological fiction genre that deal with the human condition through the landscape of illness or trauma, and in doing so, explores how writers might re-examine their histories, not as deliberate autobiography or autopathography but as a consequence of restorying. I contend this is not necessarily a conscious process.

My exegesis concludes with some ideas about how my psychological novel might have relevance to readers.

### **Narrative Therapy and The Writer**

Narrative approaches are engaged by many disciplines, including anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies, the arts and literary theory and these fields are linked by poststructuralist thinking (Dulwich Centre Publications, 2013).

The form of psychotherapy known as Narrative Therapy, developed in Australasia by Michael White and David Epston in the 1970s and 1980s (White & Epston, 1990), recognises that stories are a natural expression of people's lives. The central theoretical idea of Narrative Therapy is that people make meaning of events through stories (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Sween (1998) writes that "stories guide how people act, think, feel and make sense of new experience. Stories organise the information of a person's life. Narrative Therapy focuses on how these important stories get written and rewritten." Helping clients to comprehend their life stories is the foundation of the discipline. The view of narrative therapists take into account poststructuralist views, in particular the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. A study of their philosophies is beyond the scope of this exegesis but their views assimilated into narrative approaches are those regarding: personal identity, the value of local knowledge (people are the experts in their lives), lives being multi-storied but represented in terms of surface behaviour, lives being interpreted in terms of how they

enshrine the unexpected, and how people construct meaningful existences through the stories they remember, enact, and share (EFTC, n.d.; Massey University, n.d.).

One of the central premises of a narrative approach to healing is the fundamental link between “experiences of self, temporality, relationships with others and morality” (Crossley, 2002). Researching the experience of serious illness, Crossley discovered how a person’s routine, time and identity is severely disrupted by trauma. She saw how stories become important in such contexts and serve to rebuild a sense of coherence and connection. Leukaemia’s disruption to my orderly storyline did radically alter my assumptions about time, my body, identity, meaning and life. For a time, the problem of leukaemia *was* my identity. The focus of Narrative Therapy on externalizing problems and conversations changes the totalising effect a problem has on a person’s life and a person can experience an identity separate from the problem. (Nixon, n.d., p. 57). Through writing fiction, I was able to remove myself from my problem story and write out of a kind of dispersed consciousness. There is the construal that I, the writer, am participating as one of the (undeclared) patients in my novel.

Having accepted the externalisation of my experience of an illness in the form of a fictional work was a means of accommodating, interpreting and making sense of a life transition and challenge, I realised that writing a psychological novel was my engaging in a form of Narrative Therapy. I had a specific problem story entitled *Leukaemia*, but I chose to remember it in a different way.

In fact, I see no divergence between my thinking as a writer and that of Narrative Therapists who, according to Alice Morgan think in terms of stories: “...dominant stories and alternative stories; dominant plots and alternative plots; events being linked together

over time that have implications for past, present and future actions; stories that are powerfully shaping of lives” (Morgan, 2002). Narrative therapists invite clients to generate experience and to externalise the problem so that it is separate from the client. Clients are asked to identify protagonists, link events according to theme and plot, and to put a figurative stance on the problem. This mirrors my process of writing *Arlitz*. White (2005) writes “There are some parallels between the skills of re-authoring conversations and the skills required to produce texts of literary merit”. Kogan & Gale (1997) discuss the post-modern therapist as a “master conversationalist” or a “friendly editor”, or a “liberator of subjugated stories”. I consider a writer all of these.

A focus of Narrative Therapy is ‘rich or thick description.’

Rich description involves the articulation in fine detail of the story-lines of a person’s life. If you imagine reading a novel, sometimes a story is richly described – the motives of the characters, their histories, and own understandings are finely articulated. The stories of the characters’ lives are interwoven with the stories of other people and events. Similarly, narrative therapists are interested in finding ways for the alternative stories of people’s lives to be richly described and interwoven with the stories of others (Morgan, 2002).

In writing a fictional work, I recognise the author’s life is linked to the values, beliefs, and desires of her characters. The telling of these characters’ stories, which is, in essence, a re-telling of the author’s story, will lead to multiple contextualisations of life that contribute to a richness of narrative.

Another focus of Narrative Therapy is ‘unique outcomes’. A phrase originally devised by Michael White, it refers to those unforeseen, inadvertent and surprising insights that occur as a result of sharing stories. The narrative therapist searches for unique outcomes in people’s lives. “The therapeutic moment arrives when such an unique



outcome can be recaptured and utilized for the imagining of a better future” (Muller, 2000).

The benefits of narrative as therapy have long been documented. Illness narratives written as ‘tales from the wounded’ are told from the patients’ point of view and deal with how it feels to be disempowered and isolated, both physically and psychologically. Writing narratives puts the disruption to a patient’s life in context. The process is cathartic and writers testify to story’s transformative potential (Murali, 2013).

Many novelists attest to therapeutic journal-writing unlocking creative writing. Judith White speaks of how weaving reflections about the grief she felt at the death of her mother with the event of a duckling arriving on her doorstep fed into her fictional narrative, *The Elusive Language of Ducks*. “I was still dealing with my own grief - as the novel progressed, I kept turning towards (my mother), not even consciously, to pull her in close to me as I was writing” (White, personal communication, October 9, 2013).

Virginia Woolf (1989) in speaking of writing out her obsession with her dead mother, supposes that “I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deep emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest” (as cited in Hunt & Sampson, 1998, p.9).

Hunt and Sampson talk of writing that gives rise to therapeutic gain “by default rather than design” (p. 201). They see no indication that Woolf explicitly set out on a therapeutic quest. Woolf “was quite clear about the need to distinguish between ‘writing as an art and as self-expression’” (Hunt & Sampson, 1998, p. 9).

It is a commonly held critical view that Janet Frame wrote her early novels as a form of therapy. She reports her doctor’s opinion: “I think you need to write to survive.”

Her doctor also tells her that writing her story will “give me a clearer view of my future” (as cited in St. Pierre, 2011, p.14).

Writers are not, however, unanimous on the principles of benefit. Susan Sontag in her essay *Singleness* writes: “And my books are not a means of discovery or expressing who I am either: I’ve never fancied the ideology of writing as therapy or self-expression” (Sontag, 2001, p. 60).

Mark A. Heberle, writes in *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*:

“In an interview with Herzog in 1995, O'Brien warned that biographical information should not ‘be used to support a pop-psychology analysis of his life or a facile reading of his works as products of his own psychic therapy’” (Armstrong, 2002).

Therapeutic interpretation of literature may be seen as simplistic by critics but I wonder how a writer can completely deny the ideology of writing as therapy. As Cheryl Moskowitz (1998) writes in her essay *The Self as Source* (Hunt & Sampson, 1998, p. 35): “Writing is not an accidental act.” Heberle (2001) does go on to say that O’Brien “refabricates personal experience in order to transcend it through or recreate it as *fiction*, an *art* of trauma.”

Pateman (1998), discussing returning repressed material from the past to consciousness “*in the writing itself*” (p.159), suggests the shaping of narrative does not have to be separate from the writer but “the psychologically individual writer” and “the implied-textual author or imagined-fictive writer” (p.159) may be functioning simultaneously on the page.

I was powerless to escape the context of illness but writing *Arlitz* allowed me to redress my state of trauma. I suggest it is rarely intentional or acknowledged that giving this response to trauma value is therapeutic. I do not believe, as some authors appear to, that an admission of writing for therapeutic value somehow trivialises the work. Giving me a sense of who I am and the relationship I have with my illness is a unique and empowering outcome. Engaging with and analysing my writing has been cathartic and taken my life in a preferred direction.

### **Illness, Trauma and the Self**

When leukaemic blasts were crowding out the good cells in my marrow, I was forced to acknowledge my dependency on my body. Mortality stared at me. Illness and treatment rendered me inactive and passive. I lost my hair so that my body also became a source of shame. Biro (2011) writes that “Illness by its very nature alienates us from our bodies”. I felt for a time that my body was against me, the enemy, and there was no escape from it. As Biro (2011) suggests, illness divides the body and in turn alienates the self. Illness diminishes and alters us, makes us unrecognisable to ourselves.

Arthur Frank (1995) a cancer patient and sociologist, “talks of illness as a loss of destination and a map” (as cited in Biro, 2011, *Estranged Self*, para. 8). Biro goes on to say “So the circle widens once again: the body unravels, the self unravels and now, our relationship with the world unravels” (Biro, 2011, *Estranged World*, para. 1). The loneliness of illness is an exile from other people who can never know the emotional aspects of facing a life-threatening illness.

I suggest that people experiencing any trauma can likewise feel this sense of being lost, alone and divided. The notion of a linear and full conception of time is destabilized. Isolation and alienation are major themes in my work and in the work of the authors I examined.

Carl Jung developed a definition of ‘self’ as the *persona*, the public self, stalked by the darker *shadow*. He represented the duality of human nature through the archetypal images of *anima* and *animus* - the propensity male and female have for contra sexual manifestation (Moskowitz, 1998). A more post-modern way of observing the self is to understand it as a “plurality of fictions” (Killick, 1998, p. 166).

During my illness I felt split in many ways; between the ill self and the well self, between life and death, love and hate, loss and gain, anger and forgiveness. My multi-character narrative is a schematic that mirrors the diverse pathways I followed to reconstruct my post-illness self.

The authors I studied show their characters’ lack of bearing, the disruption of time and experience, of nature and the body. I suggest their identities were also deconstructed by a traumatic life episode and reconstructed through story and that the landscape and symbolism they use reflects a subconscious processing of this trauma.

### **Writing Through the Trauma Landscape**

Much of literature derives from authors writing about significant emotional experiences. Illness or trauma seems a fertile ground for a writer to explore emotion and theme. It is not difficult to read in *Arlitz* my personal identity themes relating to illness: mortality,

isolation, helplessness, fear and the search for meaning. I investigated several writers whose texts also dealt with the landscape of illness and trauma and look at two character-driven novels that have influenced me, namely David Vann's *Legend of a Suicide* (Vann, 2008), particularly Part One of the novella-length story *Sukkwan Island*, and Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold, 2002). Vann lost several family members to suicide. Sebold suffered a brutal beating and rape. Both wrote their texts post-trauma and their protagonists are correspondingly afflicted and investigating their position.

In my novel, there is a cameo passage about the death of Arlitz's father from leukaemia but I do not explicitly address my illness. Instead, the rhythms and processes of illness are incorporated within the novel's structure: the fragmentation of the multiple stories, the dark middle section set in a primitive, fairy tale landscape, and Arlitz's eventual revelation and hope. For the writers I studied, an abstract examination seems more expressible than an overt examination of their trauma. Vann says: "I found I had to write indirectly, finding some other occasion or story that would let me tell the more painful story indirectly" (The New Yorker, 2010).

Sebold's and Vann's works, too, are examples of psychological literary fiction, texts that deal with emotional reactions and internal states of the characters in a meaningful symbiosis with external events (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

Both authors situate their protagonists in confinement and in altered states of reality. Vann's Roy Fenn is displaced on a wilderness island in Alaska with his mentally unstable father. Sebold's Susie Salmon is dead and confined by her heaven. The landscape of Arlitz's coma is a symptom. It shows the subconscious state in synthesis with the conscious state. Susie Salmon's 'Inbetween' is a similarly liminal state. Roy

feels as if he is “coming into an enchanted land, a place that couldn’t be real” (Vann, 2008, p. 28). I suggest Vann and Sebold define their reality in terms of metaphor, as I did, constraining their ways of thinking about illness into the creative work. This goes hand in hand with a Narrative Therapy approach. Michael White was “enthusiastic about the use of spatial metaphors - metaphors such as territories and landscapes” and talked about “a process of deterritorialisation, of creating distance from the known and familiar, from the immediacy of a person’s experience” (Winslade & Hedtke, 2008, p. 76).

Pateman (1998) citing Celia Hunt’s use of circus metaphor outlined in her essay *Finding a Voice*, suggests that exploring the self demonstrates that non-literal or allegorical representations of repressed material can liberate (p. 159), while Hartill (1998) says, “When we write creatively, we are lowering a bucket into a bottomless well of meaning, paradox and metaphor” (p. 53).

In the primary landscapes of the writers I studied, there is barely a margin between internal and external realities; the protagonists’ psychological states echo their physical landscapes.

Vann states, “Alaska is remote and terrifying at times but also beautiful. It captured the isolation of the characters and also was mythic and varied enough to talk about what was going on for them inside” (The New Yorker, 2010).

Furry Moyra, the care facility of my novel, represents that margin between society and the introspective self. It is the meta-body of the story, enclosing and protecting on one hand but trapping and alienating on the other.

Like my characters, Sebold’s and Vann’s face loss, fear, their mortality, and yearn for escape. Our created landscapes are imprinted with the evidence of our pasts and the

disconnected state of illness or trauma is reflected in the many images of opposition, division and deconstruction and eventually transformation that are, in my understanding, images often evident in works based on profound emotional experience.

### **Cleaving and Crafting: Symbols of Deconstruction and Reconstruction in the Text**

Crafting a work of fiction for me is always about writing figuratively and lyrically the ‘deeper story’. I try to infuse my text with strong voice, imagery and tone. This first draft of *Arlitz* is replete with images of cleaving, opposition and death that I relate to the separation of the self that occurs as a result of illness or trauma. I outline several here and compare Vann’s and Sebold’s usage. The interpretation is up to the reader but it may be useful to understand my version. My references as an aid is *A Dictionary of Symbols* (Cirlot, 2001).

Arlitz’s nurse, Nina, says: “We adhere to another person. Cleave. The word with two meanings. One, to fuse. One, to split.” Miriam’s lip is cleft, as is the deer hoof. Arlitz cleaves and deconstructs the earth. Under a brugmansia tree, he digs a hole that is symbolic of seeking assimilation, of finding his way out of his inertia. He has worked as a gravedigger and digging the earth is also an act of solace. It connects him with himself. The poisonous tree signifies Arlitz’s above-ground self and the roots of the tree, his intuitive self, his deep feelings that can only be assumed and felt. The hole and the cave are womblike and also a gateway to his parallel life. For Jung, a cave depicted “the security and impregnability of the unconscious” (Cirlot, 2001, p. 40). Conversely, the

window of Harvey Dinky's house represents consciousness, through which Arlitz sees his other self.

Sebold's symbolic use of 'the hole' is darker. Susie goes underground with her murderer, her body is enclosed in a vault that is thrown into a sinkhole. Her murderer likes the womblike confinement of basements and crawl-spaces. 'The hole' in *The Lovely Bones* is a symbol of secrecy, entrapment and death that links with my images of the fur attic and caged animals. In *Legend of a Suicide*, Vann's characters are trapped in a small, dark room. They dig a pit for a food cache, and Roy thinks, "Nothing has gotten better. You could decide just to bury yourself in there or something" (p. 70). The hole is a deadly solution to Roy's hopelessness.

Wounds and scars are the cleaving of the skin, and, for me, represent personal identity, abnormality and violence. Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* says wounds are evidence of a story's truth (Frank, 1995, Preface, para. 3). Vann blows apart his child protagonist's head. Sebold dismembers her protagonist; mine is also dismembered. All my characters have physical and emotional scars. I did question the violence in *Arlitz* and decided it is not gratuitous but serves a thematic purpose. Arlitz's emasculation is a metaphor for submission and transfiguration. This traumatic separation embodies the most shocking violation but in my story it serves as a signifier for transition, a painful exchange from one situation to a new future - the separation is not irremediable.

Illness and trauma strips a body back to the basic - leukaemia is a rudimentary disease, situated as it is in the blood and marrow - so it is natural that elemental, life-affirming images such as earth, fire, air, water, blood and bone occur in my text. Reconciliation of the self is also represented by life-affirming symbols: seed, water, the



bee and the forest. Bees are in a perpetual state of regeneration and represent toil and creativity and rebirth. I was aware that in Hebrew ‘bee’ and ‘word’ share the same root so the bee is also my symbol of articulateness and the writer. Sebold writes of the “lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections . . . that happened between people after I was gone” (p. 320). And, “The events that my death wrought were merely the bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future (p. 320). Blood and bones represent both life and sacrifice. The sacrifice of animals is a recurrent image in *Arlitz*:

One day you realise you are surrounded by blood and shadows, Miriam says. She swipes at her eyes with her sleeve. Then you understand that the darkness is yourself and you must live the contradiction. There’s the compassionate and decent you but with this capacity for dark thoughts and darker actions.

‘The hunt’ is a motif in both my work and Vann’s. Hunting (and also in *Arlitz*, the trapping of animals) denotes pursuit and desire and the darkness of the human soul (Cirlot, 2001, p. 154). Writing the violent scenes in *Arlitz* did cause me to look deeper into my psyche and go to the place of “blood and shadows.”

The universal values of pairs and opposites occurring in nature are physical and psychological. Ice and snow mean beauty and peace but also stultification and frigidity. Winter, the dominant season in Part Two of *Arlitz* symbolises purity and beauty but also emotional paralysis, limbo and death. Sebold’s snow is both concealing and cleansing. The snow globe is Susie’s and her father’s perfect world. Snow falls on the day of Susie’s death and on that of her murderer’s. The icicle is a perfect weapon for retribution. Vann’s characters are lost in the snow and almost die.

A recurring symbol is the twilight of Furry Moyra, which represents the line dividing a pair of opposites and symbolises the coma world and the struggle between illness and wellness. Half-light is related to the hanged man or any object suspended between heaven and earth. Evening light is linked with the West, the location of death. A symbol of dichotomy, twilight signifies a blurring of definition, mirroring the characters' and the writer's ambivalence and uncertainty (Cirlot, 2001, p. 355).

The representation of deconstruction and reconstruction in text echoes the process of moving through trauma and also the process of Narrative Therapy when the problem is deconstructed, bifurcated from the patient, and rebuilt using unique moments and elements of the hopeful and preferred story (Shapiro & Ross, 2002).

The deliberate use of symbols to support themes and to create tactile and resonant power in the narrative is integral to my writing craft. I recognise that the symbols Sebold, Vann and I employ provide a clue to our intrapsychic landscapes as we seek to reconstruct the wounded body and transcend duality.

### **Witnessing the Narrative: Psychological Fiction in the World**

In posing the question: "Do writers recognise, in retrospect, personal growth or catharsis as a positive outcome of their work?" I conclude Sebold and Vann hesitate to label their work as 'therapy' but they do both see the outcome of their novels as therapeutic, both for themselves and for their readers. I doubt my chosen authors wrote out of a need for empathy or moral obligation to share experience but, like me, were writing about the human condition - our narrators unreliable and in some ways identical to us. We were

not attempting to restory ourselves through our plots and characters but I suggest we revealed more about ourselves than the reality we sought to describe.

Sebold put aside *The Lovely Bones* to write her memoir *Lucky*. This, she says, freed up “Susie to lead me where she wanted to take me and tell me her story in the way she wanted to tell it, as opposed to me feeling perhaps that I needed to really tell the real deal about every detail about rape and violence.” (*Alice sebold's dark tale moves to the silver screen*, 2009).

Peter Terzian (2002) states that reviews of Sebold’s work ascribe the success of her writing to the “implicitly gendered rhetoric of therapy”.

At this point in our conversation it becomes impossible to ignore the elephant in the room: the insistent and exceedingly complex relationship between life and work in Sebold's writing. She insists, properly and naturally enough, that fiction is fiction. In the next breath she recognises that her readers will inevitably try to psychoanalyse her through her books. Implicitly, she acknowledges that this response is not inappropriate. ‘It's impossible for that not to happen,’ she concedes. ‘I understand the human condition. That's just the way we work.’ She fully acknowledges the intense, sometimes direct relationship between her experience and her writing (Terzian, 2002).

Vann was worried that his father’s dreadful end was also waiting for him. Claire Allfree (2011) suggests that Vann sees his fiction as a means to give order to chaotic events and in doing so, redeem them. “‘Writing makes it beautiful,’ he argues. ‘It takes this ugly family story and makes it something else.’ Writing, then, for him, is slightly talismanic, the only way he has of divining the deeper mysteries of his own life” (Allfree, 2011). Asked about the event of Roy’s death in *Sukkwan Island*, Vann responds:

I didn't see the boy's suicide coming, for instance, until it happened in that sentence.

And then I didn't know how to write the second half. But I just followed the father, and ended up writing about how he discovers his son's body, and I had never been able to write about what my father would have looked like afterwards, so fiction works indirectly in that way.

I think it was a kind of psychological revenge. But it was also an expression of a kind of redemption, or wish that our love for him should have been enough to have him stick around. And the boy does make a sacrifice for him in that story (The New Yorker, 2010).

Like Vann, I simply followed my characters. I listened to them with compassion and I wrote down what they said. In that way, I took on the role of therapist, and became a witness in creating a context for change. I see my novel, *Arlitz*, as this context, as a literary therapeutic document acknowledging my problem, exploring my experience through a landscape of identity and meaning. Like a therapist, in asking: "How can I ease their suffering?" I gave my characters ways to resurrect themselves. In doing so, I learned the deconstruction of the self in the passage of illness can be reconstructed through writing fiction. Trauma was the medium through which the characters were compelled to revisit their life experiences and the plot grew out of their thinly-described stories. By assimilating fragments of reality and imagination, and exploring themes and symbols that relate to the landscape of nature, the body and the mind, the writing of a fictional work became, for me, restorative, an attestation of power and hope.

Because my methodology is intuitive with an emphasis on self-engagement and self-expression, I tend to write out of need rather than an awareness of my audience and am primarily interested in the aesthetics of the work. I only become aware of the 'real author' of my narrative when I become a 'real reader'. In his famous essay, *Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes (1972) submits "the writer is really a *scriptor* who no longer

bears with him passions, humours, feelings, impressions” (as cited in Pateman, 1998, p.158). Pateman takes exception to Barthe’s view, suggesting that unless we have experienced, for example, profound depression in ourselves or others, we cannot express it fully in tone. I agree with Pateman’s contention that we can value the properties of writing from which the writer has disappeared but “the words of the literary text can appear as expressive of the life of the psychologically real author and serve as evidence for the character and opinions of that author” (Pateman, 1998. p. 159). My examination of authors shows they shy away from a ‘writing as therapy’ interpretation of their texts but if, as Barthes opines, the author is dead, the reader is free to deconstruct the text and the author’s intention. I believe the state of the writer is always readable in the tone of the text and the understandings any reader acquires about the purpose of the text cannot be rejected.

Jan Campbell, in her essay *Transformative Reading: Reconfigurations of the Self Between Experience and the Text* writes:

When we read, we bring to the literary text our unspoken and experiential life stories, and it is the dialogical interchange between these stories and the second-order narrative of the text which produces meaning. Narrative meaning is not simply there, structurally embedded in the text, but is produced through a dialogical interchange between our life stories and the text (Campbell, 1998, p. 171).

Therefore, my potential reader may refigure the meaning of her/his text self “and also refigure the self in relation to the outside world” (Campbell, 1998).

Frank (1995) says “. . . the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability” (Preface, para. 2). He was writing about illness narratives but I suggest this applies just

as pertinently to the novel. In witnessing their own stories of suffering, Vann and Sebold found they, in turn, became witnesses to their readers' stories.

Vann says about *Legend of a Suicide*: "I'm just happy that it's out there and that it's finally published. A lot of suicide survivors have come and told me their stories, and I kind of find that fulfilling" (Walters, 2011).

Writing about *The Lovely Bones* in *People* magazine, Karen Brailsford quotes Alice Sebold: "People are finding it a healing book," she says. "One man [who had lost a loved one] said he felt it was a permission slip for grief" (Brailsford, 2002). And Sebold loves the idea "that a teenage girl is going to read that book and it will take some of the taboo and the weirdness away from her for having been raped" (Terzian, 2002).

Narrative Therapy is in a relatively embryonic stage compared to other psychotherapeutic disciplines and so accounts about how Narrative Therapy approaches are applied in practice can be selective and collaborative (Wallis, Burns & Capdevilla, 2010). In choosing to examine the cross-over of Narrative Therapy and my methodology in writing a novel, I found I engaged the technique of a narrative therapist in exposing my problem and recognising it. I became aware of how my problem related to the world and I richly described the alternative scenario of my illness experience using metaphor and strong themes to arrive at a unique outcome - an alternative way of looking at my 'problem story' and a cathartic release from trauma. My story, I hope, will be witnessed by others and generate experiences in them. This exegesis, I hope, has gone some way toward answering how writing a psychological novel can be likened to engaging in a form of Narrative Therapy. The possibilities of further study into how Narrative Therapy

and fiction-writing (and indeed fiction-reading) align are enticing, especially from the illness or trauma perspective examined here.

To return to Gerard Donovan's words, my impetus to write *Arlitz* was to "tell a story of the human heart". Ultimately, my book is about being human. Literature dealing with the human condition and created out of an author's serious illness or trauma, I believe, can connect with its readers and answer the question: When bad things happen how do we keep on living?

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