

BRIDGING ASPECTS OF RHYTHM AND PROSE FICTION

AND

DEMI-GODS

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Abstract

My novel, *Demi-Gods*, begins when nine-year-old Willa meets Patrick, eleven, in 1950. Patrick is visiting their Salt Spring Island beach house from San Diego. On the first morning, Willa follows him to the beach, where he coaxes her into a dilapidated rowboat. Their cruise ends when she is stung by a jellyfish and Patrick convinces her to urinate on herself. This transaction, in which Patrick asserts authority over her body and she complies, cinches a knot of power between them. As the years proceed, this bond thickens. It's not until later that she realizes their relationship is essentially self-effacing. Willa has never felt exalted under anyone else's gaze, and Patrick has never felt as powerful. The knot of power has altered them both.

Rather than explore my creative practice thematically, I have found it more fruitful to unpack a concept central to the novel's form and formation: rhythm. My thesis seeks to understand that centrality—how rhythm initiates and sustains my writing and fiction more broadly. Before Plato emphasized the link between *rhuthmos* (ρυθμός) and *metron* (μέτρον), rhythm signified a fluid or flowing form. The first chapter contrasts two traditional metaphors for rhythm, *rheos* vs. *cadentibus guttis*. By tracing the etymology of *rhuthmos*, I find these metaphors are not mutually exclusive. In the second chapter, I question the metaphors we use to identify “presence” in prose fiction. I draw upon Derrida's deconstruction of the presence-absence hierarchy and pitch rhythm as an alternative metaphor to “voice.” The final chapter draws parallels between my study of rhythm and Henri Bergson's theory of duration, with a focus on the grammatical verbal. Here, I apply the concepts I have been discussing to Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. In its entirety, my thesis contemplates the ways in which rhythm bridges the experience of the reader with the experience of the writer, and how rhythm calls to me personally.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	5
Bridging Aspects of Rhythm and Prose	6
Introduction	7
Chapter 1: “Two Metaphors for Rhythm”	21
Chapter 2: “Rhythm as a Metaphor for Presence”	35
Chapter 3: “Rhythm, <i>Durée</i> and the Grammatical Verbal”	55
Conclusion	74
<i>Demi-Gods</i>	84
Bibliography	280

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BRIDGING ASPECTS OF RHYTHM
AND PROSE FICTION

Introduction

In London, on June 10, 2000, the city opened a steel suspension bridge. The bridge linked St. Paul's Cathedral on the North side of the river with the Tate Modern gallery on the South. Over one thousand people gathered on the bridge's South end to celebrate its completion. White and cream banners lined the handrails; a band played. When it was time, the band led the crowd across. As more people filed onto the bridge, the deck began to sway—imperceptibly at first, then uncomfortably. Some stopped to grasp the handrails. Most shuffled forward like a flock of sheep with banana peels strapped to their hooves. It turned out the engineers had accounted for the crowd's vertical, not lateral vibrations.¹ The pedestrians' tendency to fall in step with their neighbours caused the bridge to sway. Though the movement started inconspicuously, the crowd adjusted their steps to the bridge's motion so they could balance better. As the pedestrians synchronized their gaits to each other's, and to the bridge's, vibration, the bridge's vibration increased. What strikes me about this incident is our readiness to walk in time.

The Millennium Bridge example contains a question that underlies the study of rhythm and literature: does rhythm precede the writing of a text (did the bridge's sway cause pedestrians to alter their gaits), or does it emerge from the process of writing itself (did the synchronized footfalls cause the bridge to sway)? Is it possible that rhythm can both precede and emerge from the text? Similarly: what differentiates rhythm in the product (*ergon*) of a text—rhythms we may point to as critics, such as meter or rhetorical devices—from rhythm experienced in the process (*energeia*) of writing or reading? All these rhythms I have named—rhythm that precedes writing, rhythm that emerges from writing or reading, the rhythmic material in a text—are they aspects of one concept, like different faces on a prism, nuanced only by our descriptive and linguistic limitations? Or indeed, do they point to different phenomena altogether? These are the questions I will ask and seek to understand.

¹ David E Newland, "Vibration of the London Millennium Footbridge," *Department of Engineering, University of Cambridge*, accessed January 7 2014, http://www2.eng.cam.ac.uk/~den/ICSV9_06.htm.

It is thematically gratifying to start with the Millennium Bridge example because it introduces the body—groups of bodies who are moved by rhythm before they have a chance to think. The idea for this project emerged from a dance workshop I took in Sweden in 2012, where we were guided to internalize the rhythm of a song before we expressed the movement physically. Rhythm and the body is a relationship I will return to over the course of this thesis. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, it was while describing the movement of a body dancing that Plato first applied the notion of *metron* (μέτρον), or measure, to *rhuthmos* (ρυθμός). In Chapter 2, I will look at the hierarchy of presence over absence, speech over writing, and spirit over body in Saussurian linguistics. Bodies appear here in the very metaphors we use: we refer to a body of work, for instance, the body of a text or essay. In Chapter 3, I will discuss rhythm as a means to link bodies—the body of a reader with the body of a writer through the body of the text.

It may be a feature of my style as a writer, or a feature of the subject material, but metaphors have proven central to my conceptualizing of rhythm. The first chapter, for instance, is framed around two metaphors, which are often pitched as mutually incompatible: rhythm as *rheos*, continuous flow vs. rhythm as *cadentibus guttis*, or falling drops. As mentioned, I will dig into the etymology of *rhuthmos* (ρυθμός) and suggest that these two metaphors are not necessarily opposed. In Chapter 2, I will conduct the reverse exercise: rather than examine metaphors *for* rhythm, I will pitch rhythm *as* a metaphor for presence in literary fiction. Derrida’s deconstruction of the presence-absence hierarchy proves useful here, and I will offer the verb “presenting” as a way to articulate presence in literary fiction that does not pitch presence over absence, but still articulates the value of “vital” characters and prose. In the third and final chapter, I will turn to Bergson’s concept of duration—the discussion of which bears linguistic similarities to my discussion of rhythm— and I will describe the grammatical verbal as a linguistic metaphor for rhythm, as well as an example of rhythm as it functions in text material. To return to my initial metaphor of Millennium Bridge, it is worth pointing out the bridge implicit in the word *metaphor* itself. Metaphor comes from the Greek *μεταφέρω* (*metaphorō*), “to transfer.” If we break the word down, we have *μετά*

(*meta*), which means “after, with, across,” and *φέρω* (*pherō*), “to bear,” or “to carry.” Metaphors are bridges. They carry meaning across.

A final reason Millennium Bridge provides a useful starting place is it introduces the concept of “sway.” As a fiction writer, the work I am most proud of emerges from, or contemporaneously with, what I will describe inadequately for now as a “sway”—not a character or plot idea. I did not begin *Demi-Gods* with its narrative content. Indeed—the trajectory of the novel did not take shape until the third draft. I began with a setting, inspired by footage my Grandfather shot on his Super 8 camera in 1950s San Diego. But before I explored that setting in words, I had to access something woolier to articulate—this interior sway. When I write, I sense a sway in my mind before the movement breaks the surface into words—or the sway emerges from the writing itself: which comes first is a question I seek to explore. But the writing I am most proud of—those rare, electric moments of composition where the words pass through me as a current—begin with a movement, a numinous sway I can only identify as rhythm.

Etymological and Historical Context

The history of rhythm studies divides into two groups: 1. those who draw from the pre-Platonic understanding of rhythm as *rhuthmos* (*ρυθμός*), from the verb *rhein*, to flow—specifically the form of an object as it is moving (or flowing), such as a stream or the body of a dancer; and 2. those who bind *rhuthmos* to *metron*, as initiated by Plato. There are debates and nuances within these groups, of course, but this divide between rhythm as form as it is moving and rhythm as even beats, or measure, has shaped the path of rhythm studies for centuries. Those reluctant to divorce the notion of rhythm from measure (i.e. those who equate rhythm with poetic meter or regular beats in music) may have trouble conceptualizing rhythm in prose outside basic scansion. Thus this debate sits at the heart of my thesis, and I will discuss it thoroughly in the coming chapters.

The word “flow” is used by some thinkers as a synonym for flux, and by others as a synonym for continuity—a contradiction I will address before I continue. At the beginning of “The Notion of Rhythm,” Émile Benveniste writes:

If *ρῶθος* means ‘flux, flowing,’ it is hard to see how it could have taken on the value proper to the word ‘rhythm.’ There is a contradiction of meaning between *ῥέειν* and *ρῶθος*, and we cannot extricate ourselves from the difficulty by imagining—and this is pure invention—that *ρῶθος* could have described the movement of the waves. What is more, *ρῶθος* in its most ancient uses never refers to flowing water, and it does not even mean ‘rhythm.’²

Heidegger echoes this sentiment when he says: “rhythm, *rhuthmos*, does not mean flux and flowing, but rather structure [*Fügung*.] Rhythm is what is at rest, what structures [*Fügt*] the movement [*Be-wegung*] of dance and song, and thus lets it rest within itself.”³

For Meschonnic, on the other hand, no structure can be drawn from rhythm because rhythm is the moment of discourse—that is, of enunciation, which is unique from every other enunciation, even its repetition (which forms a separate enunciation).⁴ As Marko Pajević explains: “Rhythm for Meschonnic is not the rigid metrical arrangement of language; it is language in movement, the flow of language in its continuum.” (310) Benveniste himself restores the quality of “flow” to *rhuthmos* later in the same essay. He writes:

The primary sense [of *ρῶθος*], the one we have just deduced, seems unquestionably to take us far away from “to flow,” by which others have explained it. And nevertheless, we shall not lightly

² Émile Benveniste, “The Notion of ‘Rhythm’ in its Linguistic Expression,” *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), 282. All further references are included in the text.

³ Martin Heidegger, “Words,” *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc, 1971), 149.

⁴ Marko Pajević, “Beyond the Sign. Henri Meschonnic’s Poetics of the Continuum and of Rhythm: Towards an Anthropological Theory of Language,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 47, no. 3 (2011): 310. All further references are included in the text.

abandon a comparison which is morphologically satisfying; the relation of *ρυθμός* to *ῥέω* [*rheō*] does not in itself give rise to any objection. It is not this derivation itself that we have criticized, but the wrong sense of *ρυθμός* that was deduced from it. (285)

I will not unpick the etymology further here, as we will delve into a detailed history of *rhuthmos* (*ρυθμός*) in the next chapter. For the sake of clarifying my use of the word “flow,” however, I will skip ahead to Benveniste’s conclusion. Unlike *σχῆμα* [*skhēma*], another word for form that signifies a fixed shape, *rhuthmos*

designates the form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid, the form of that which does not have organic consistency....we can now understand that *ρυθμός*, meaning literally “the particular manner of flowing,” could be the proper term for describing “dispositions” or “configurations” without fixity... (285-286)

Thus, when I speak of rhythm as “flow,” I do not mean flux—as indicated by Heidegger (and Benveniste at the beginning of his essay)—but rhythm as *form* in the instant that it is flowing.

As I say above, the question of whether rhythm indicates regular beats (a claim that corresponds to Heidegger’s assertion that rhythm is structure, though the two assertions are not coequal) or whether rhythm indicates flow (which in turn corresponds to Meschonnic’s notion of rhythm as the continual process of subjectivation) sits at the heart of rhythm studies. I should note that I use the phrase “rhythm studies” to denote the history of thought on rhythm, on which there has been renewed attention since the 1990s. It is a phrase that we can only apply retrospectively, as none of the above thinkers would have considered themselves contributors to “rhythm studies” as such—their theories of rhythm sit within a wider context of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, art, linguistics and poetics. Before we enter a theoretical exploration of rhythm as a concept, it is necessary to acknowledge the philosophers that have contributed to this study of rhythm over time.

After Plato, when *rhuthmos* became tied to *metron*, rhythm was considered irrelevant outside the domains of music, dance and poetry. This began to shift in the latter half of the eighteenth century when,

for the first time since the Ionian Greeks, the question of rhythm percolated back into other disciplines. According to Pascal Michon, who is writing an extensive history on the evolution of “rhythmology,” the first thinker to theorize rhythm outside music is Denis Diderot, who wrote on this matter between 1750 and 1784. Diderot’s ontological and epistemological theories describe “the ways of flowing of the singular and collective individuals composing the Universe... what we may call a *rhythmology*.”⁵ Diderot is also one of the first thinkers to examine rhythm in poetry without deferring to a poem’s metrics. In the *Salon* of 1767, he claims “*le rythme est tout*”—that word choice and syllable distribution release a “prosodical magic.”⁶ Rhythm is no mere succession of beats, but: “the very image of the soul rendered by vocal inflection, successive nuances, transitions, a tone of utterance that speeds up, slows down, flashes brilliantly, effaces itself, is moderated in a hundred different ways...” (231) Diderot called this image a “hieroglyph,” which is “co-present in the succession of moments in the spoken change. It is an active organization principle, both elemental and organic, which defines the character of a poetic text and its signifying elements.”⁷ For Diderot, the hieroglyph of a text (and I would extend this description to any artistic work, not simply poetry) and the artist’s *manière*, or style, are forms of individuation at the same time they are forms of subjectivation, for though an individual artist is herself an agent, the hieroglyph of her work has a capacity for action itself, which will continue in the future as new readers access the text. The poem or artwork constitutes a “trans-subject,” or “signifying rhythmic system,” which invokes pleasure or displeasure to pass through us without our knowledge. (Michon, 2016) Michon writes:

We must reach back from the work operation to its hieroglyphic explosive drive, which is what can be indefinitely re-actualized in the future by countless readers, viewers, listeners, bringing to each one of them an upheaval in his or her life, a power to go ahead... In short, we must

⁵ Pascal Michon, “Rhythm as Rhuthmos – Denis Diderot (1749-1777) – Part 1”, *Rhuthmos*, 1 June 2016, <http://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article1853>. All further references are included in the text.

⁶ Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, trans. John Goodman (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 231.

⁷ Pascal Michon, “Rhythm as Rhuthmos – Denis Diderot (1751-1777) – Part 2,” *Rhuthmos*, 28 July 2016. <http://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article1829>. All further references are included in the text.

recognize one global dynamic organization, a rhythm, a “manière” that can disturb, empower and charm, first the one in which it appears and eventually in any other human being (Michon, 2016.)

This notion of writing as trans-subject—the linking, disruptive, empowering quality of rhythm—recalls our conversation of bridges, for rhythm provides a bridge that links readers and writers through the text.

Between 1785 and 1804, thinkers in Germany, starting with Moritz, Schiller and Goethe, but perhaps more significantly with August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friedrich Hölderlin, begin a similar reflection that restores the concept rhythm to public discourse in subjects outside music or metrical form.⁸ These thinkers do not reject discussions of meter, but seek to determine the relationship between the two understandings of rhythm—rhythm as a concept that impacts other disciplines and rhythm as measure. Schlegel, for instance, regards the two notions of rhythm not as different realities, but as aspects of a broader phenomenon. (Michon, 2016) In *Sprache und Poetik*, Schlegel writes: “the particular verse of the epic is the expression and audible image of this inner spiritual rhythm present in its enunciation” (as cited in Michon, 2016). Once again, the rhythmic material of a text is considered the “audible image,” for Diderot, the hieroglyph, of an “inner spiritual rhythm.” What’s more, Schlegel considers the rhythmic quality of language as old as language itself—which began similar to the cry of animals and birds, he suggests, supported by the fact that infants start to use their voices by screaming.⁹

Hölderlin builds on this work with his analyses of the caesura in tragedy rhythms. For Hölderlin, rhythm is the course of the tragic poem—the organization of the tragedy, which is not simply a formal organization, but a “general matrix during the act of creation itself.” The completed work is thus “an expression of this dynamic form.” (Michon, 2016) The caesura is an anti- or counter-rhythmical interruption in Sophocles’ tragedies, when the “succession or alteration of representations” (rhythm) is

⁸ Pascal Michon, “Rhythm as Rhuthmos – The German Romantics (1785-1804),” *Rhuthmos*, 1 June 2016, <http://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article1764>. All further references are included in the text.

⁹ Katia D. Hay, “August Wilhelm Schlegel,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. January 14, 2010. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schlegel-aw/>.

disrupted and “representation itself appears.”¹⁰ Caesura is the “‘pure word’ (*das reine Wort*) which, rather than allowing the subject to recognize himself, ‘rips him out of his own sphere of life, out of the centre of his own inner life, and carries him off into another world and into the eccentric sphere of the dead’” (31) —an idea that echoes the Dionysian rhythm Nietzsche describes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which we will discuss in Chapter 1.

As the 19th century progresses, the metrical theories outlined by Gottfried Hermann, and subsequently Schelling and Hegel, restore to rhythm the notion of regular time intervals, or meter.¹¹ Hermann published four books on metrics, all of which outlined an *a priori* definition of rhythm based on rational analysis. Hermann asserts a fundamental law of rhythm, which necessitates a constant equality of time intervals (syllables) except the first in a succession—a theory which disregards the patterns of Greek and Latin verses and modern poetry in general.¹² Friedrich Schelling, on the other hand, incorporates the concept of rhythm into a cosmological idealism:

Music manifests, in rhythm and harmony, the pure form of the movements of the heavenly bodies, freed from any object or material. In this respect, music is the art which casts off the corporeal, in that it presents movement in itself, divorced from any object, borne on invisible, almost spiritual wings...In the world of planets, rhythm is the dominant principle, their movements are pure melody; in the world of comets, it is harmony that dominates.¹³

Other than the quixotic depiction of rhythm as the dominant principle of planets, whose movements are “pure melody,” this understanding is at odds with any study of rhythm and literature because it venerates

¹⁰ Andrzej Warminski, “Facing Language: Wordsworth’s First Poetic Spirits (‘Blest Babe,’ ‘Drowned Man,’ ‘Blind Beggar’),” *Material Inscriptions: Rhetorical Reading in Practice and Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 31.

¹¹ Pascal Michon, “Rhythm as Meters, Cycles and Periods – Life Science, Metrics and Idealist Philosophy (1759-1829),” *Rhuthmos*, 1 June 2016, <http://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article1766>

¹² Michon, “Rhythm as Meters, Cycles and Periods,” *Rhuthmos*, 2016.

¹³ F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie de L’art*, trans. fr. by C. Sulzer and A. Pernet (Grenoble: Krisis, 1999), 191-193.

art for “casting off the corporeal,” thus subordinating the body (and writing) to the celestial spirit (music, speech).

In a different approach still, Hegel does not conceptualize rhythm in itself, but uses the term metaphorically, equating rhythm with poetic meter. From *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “this conflict between the general form of a proposition and the unity of the concept which destroys that form is similar to the concept that occurs in rhythm between meter and accent. Rhythm results from the juggle and unification of both.”¹⁴ Hegel opposes Diderot, Schlegel and Hölderlin when he claims that “words are only signs of ideas and therefore the real origin of poetic speech lies neither in the choice of single words and the manner of their collocation into sentences and elaborate paragraphs, nor in euphony, rhythm, rhyme, etc., but in the sort and kind of ideas.”¹⁵ He goes so far as to accuse rhythm of imbuing a text with a “sensuous charm” or magic that obscures the ideas it represents:

Of course the trick of meter and the interlacings of rhyme seem an irksome bond between the sensuous element and the inner ideas... While the flow of rhythm and the melodic sound of rhyme exercises on us an indisputable magic, it would be regrettable to find the best poetic feelings and ideas often sacrificed for the sake of this sensuous charm. (1012)

Only one thinker in Germany continues to develop reflections of *rhuthmos* as flow in the early nineteenth century: Wilhelm von Humboldt. Unlike Hegel, Humboldt affirms language as a perpetual human activity (*energeia*), not a mere collection of products or signs (*ergon*.) He borrows Diderot’s concept of the hieroglyph, or tableau (which he translates into German as *bild*), to claim that each language is a “tableau of the people’s soul in motion” and constitutes with other languages an “ensemble” of interacting hieroglyphs.¹⁶ Rhythm is not the metric organization of verse, but “the dark ebb and flow of feeling and

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), § 61.

¹⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1000. All further references are included in the text.

¹⁶ Pascal Michon, “Birth of a Rhythmological Conflict (1800-1830),” *Rhuthmos*, 1 June 2016, <http://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article1766>

psyche before it spills into words...[Rhythm] is a pure form that no material makes heavier, and reveals itself by means of sounds.”¹⁷

Humboldt clearly rejects the semiotic model favoured by Hegel, which ossifies language into a series of signs inferior to the ideas they depict. Instead, he echoes the theories of Diderot and his German Romantic predecessors who understood language as an ongoing human activity that cannot be separable from thought. However, Humboldt was isolated in his lifetime. Following his death in 1834, discussions of rhythm receded outside the spheres of music, poetry and dance for two decades.¹⁸

In the 1850s, artists and thinkers like Baudelaire, Wagner, Mallarmé and Nietzsche returned *rhythmos* to the artistic, scientific and political arenas. From here, rhythm remained in the public discourse until the Second World War, where it disappeared, once more, until the late 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s with writers like Benveniste, Meschonnic, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Henri Lefebvre and Julia Kristeva. It is with this period that my own critical exploration of rhythm begins.

Methodology

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot says:

Let us recall Hölderlin: “All is rhythm,” he is supposed to have said...How is this sentence to be understood? “All” does not mean the cosmic in an already ordered totality, which it would be rhythm’s job to maintain. Rhythm does not belong to the order of nature of language, or even of “art,” where it seems to predominate. Rhythm is not the simple alteration of Yes and No, of “giving-withholding,” of presence-absence or of living-dying, producing-destroying. Rhythm, while it engages the multiple form of its missing unity, and while it appears regular and seems to

¹⁷ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Übersetzungen – Agamemnon*, 1816, as cited in Michon, “Birth of a Rhythmological Conflict (1800-1830),” 2016.

¹⁸ Michon, “Birth of a Rhythmological Conflict (1800-1830),” 2016.

govern according to a rule, threatens the rule... The enigma of rhythm—dialectical, nondialectical, no more the one than the other—is the extreme danger. That we should speak in order to make sense of rhythm, and to make rhythm, which is not sensible—perceptible and meaningful: such is the mystery which traverses us.”¹⁹

It bears repeating: such is the mystery that traverses us. In this thesis, I attempt the inverse exercise: to traverse the mystery of rhythm through the labour of unpicking and parsing what we mean when we speak of its etymology, when we speak of presence and voice in fiction, when we speak of time, duration, and rhythmic material. Thinkers describe this labour in different ways. Humbolt suggests the form of language itself exists in the “mental labour of elevating articulated sound to an expression of thought.”²⁰ Here he refers to everyday speech and writing, but critics engage in the same exercise when they parse or scan a paragraph. As Blanchot writes above, we must speak (or write) in order to make sense of rhythm and to make rhythm perceptible and meaningful. Bergson suggests a different labour: rewriting. He advises the student of literature to copy a text by hand to “appropriate the inspiration of the author.”²¹ We will return to this idea in Chapter 3, but what I wish to emphasize now is the practice of reading as an active process, and the discoveries a critic might make by traversing or crossing a text “on foot.”²² For these reasons, my project does not seek to define rhythm—such linguistic pinning down objectifies concepts instead of

¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.)

²⁰ Wilhelm von Humboldt, “*On Language*”: *On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, trans. Peter Heath, edited by Michael Losonsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50.

²¹ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics: The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1975), 58.

²² I’m alluding here to Walter Benjamin’s *One-Way Street*, in which he too suggests we copy a text by hand, so that readers may appreciate the power a country road commands, the “distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns...” compared to the airplane passenger, who sees only a distant plain. See Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 50.

engaging with them. It calls to mind the *fin* in definition. The *finite* in definite.²³ Rather, I seek to “traverse” the concept of rhythm, as you traverse a bridge, through an active questioning and unpicking of different theories. I have approached this project with an intentionally “eclectic” methodology: drawing from a variety of theorists to articulate ideas I am exploring as a creative writer. Though I reference Derrida’s deconstruction of the presence-absence hierarchy, my project does not aspire toward a deconstructionist reading of rhythm. Similarly, though I discuss the experience of writing and reading, I do not situate my thesis within a phenomenological framework. Indeed, Henri Lefebvre highlights the distinction between “rhythmanalysis” and phenomenology when he says that to grasp a rhythm, you must be grasped by it. You must let go and abandon yourself to the beat, rather than analyze experience from outside.²⁴ The eclectic methodology feels apt for the subject of rhythm, which is not confined to the fields of poetry or music, but is in fact inherently interdisciplinary, as demonstrated by the thinkers I have named. Further, this approach suits the framework of the creative-critical project, which encourages an organic dialogue to unfold between the creative work and critical research. That is, my choice not to pre-determine a single source text or thinker at the start of my project has allowed the critical side of my PhD to respond to discoveries I’ve made in the creative writing process, and vice versa. Lévi-Strauss’ concept of *bricolage* is useful here. I have selected thinkers with the same spirit as the *bricoleuse*, who performs her tasks with “whatever is at hand,” or in my case, whatever follows from previous discoveries.²⁵

My critical thesis assumes the shape of three distinct though connected chapters, in which I have endeavoured to traverse a different aspect of rhythm and how it functions in prose fiction. Chapter 1 unpacks rhythm as a philosophical concept by addressing the dual-metaphor of rhythm as the break or

²³ Julian Wolfreys, “Deconstruction,” *Derrida: a Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 19.

²⁴ *Pour saisir un rythme, il faut avoir été saisi par lui; il faut se laisser aller, se donner, s’abandonner à sa durée.* Henri Lefebvre, *Éléments de Rythmanalyse: Introduction à la Connaissance des Rythmes* (Paris: Syllepse, 1992), 41–42.

²⁵ Claude Lévi Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, transl. George Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd. (Paris: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 11.

“falling drop” described by Nietzsche and rhythm as the continued flow of subjectivation described by Meschonnic. I will argue that the two halves of this metaphor need not be dichotomous. Rhythm can serve as a break or caesura at the same time it continually flows. To reach this conclusion, I conduct my own parsing of the word *rhuthmos* (ρυθμός), guided by Benveniste’s etymology, and assert how the fluidity of the word is mirrored in its very grammatical form.

Chapter 2 discusses rhythm as a metaphor for presence in literary fiction. Here, we traverse the notion of metaphor itself and question the metaphors that predominate the discourse on literary style. I will draw from Derrida’s deconstruction of the presence-absence hierarchy and pitch rhythm as a more vital metaphor set than “voice” in discussions of prose fiction.

Chapter 3 investigates Henri Bergson’s concept of *durée*, or duration, and proposes a bridge between his theories of time and my own thoughts on rhythm as a writer. In this chapter, I will also explore the grammatical spectre that lingers over the entire project: verbals, a maverick verb form that combines verbs with another part of speech, often nouns or adjectives. To demonstrate how verbals shape the rhythm of a sentence, and even an entire book, I will analyze their effect on Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*.

Rhythm surrounds us: tides ebb and flow; the moon waxes and wanes. Earth rotates every twenty-four hours. Every 365.25 days, we orbit the sun. We see rhythm in schools of fish, flocks of starlings, rings of a tree. Our mother’s pulse regulates our first environment, the womb. Before we open our eyes as infants, we breathe. Every cell in our body twitches with an electric impulse from the sino-atrial node, which generates our heartbeat. Rhythm is visceral, pre-verbal. What relates to us as writers, readers and critics is that we are drawn to it. That is why humans dance. Why two people on the street, or a bridge, accidentally step in time. But it is easier to point to rhythm, as I have done in this paragraph, than speak meaningfully about what that word calls to or calls for. Above all, that is the exercise I embark on: to cross the notion of

rhythm and witness, on foot, the power it commands, the belvederes, clearings and prospects at each of its turns.²⁶

²⁶ See again Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street*, on the power of re-writing: "The power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how...it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns..." (London: Verso, 1979), 50.

I

Two Metaphors for Rhythm

Here the essence of rhythm is seen as the succession of even, often diverse, intervals of time: as [Cicero] says elsewhere, rhythm is in *cadentibus guttis*, not in the rush of a stream.²⁷

Friedrich Nietzsche

Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?²⁸

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

Stream / Falling Drops

In the introduction, I discussed the debate at the heart of rhythm studies: on one side, rhythm is characterized by regular beats, *metron*, order. The other returns to a pre-Plato definition of rhythm: *rhuthmos* as fluid or moving form, from the verb *rhein*, to flow. Each understanding can be conceived by two metaphors, which I have borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche and Benveniste respectively. Both images invoke water: rhythm as a flowing stream versus rhythm as *cadentibus guttis* or falling drops. This chapter will be concerned with unpicking the two sides and situating prose rhythm within the debate. But first, to begin asking what we mean by “rhythm,” I will extend the water analogy even further.

My initial question is: if falling drops are rhythmic, what does that make a leaky faucet? We lose ourselves at a jazz show, as we clap on the offbeat. We lose ourselves on Millennium Bridge, our feet “falling” in time. In both examples, we feel compelled— by the instruments that produce music, each other’s clap, the gaits of our neighbours, the sway of the bridge. By contrast, a leaky faucet does not move us; it irritates. One difference is the drip’s unpredictability—we cannot forget ourselves within it. More or

²⁷ James W. Halporn, “Nietzsche: on the Theory of Quantitative Rhythm,” *Arion* 6, no. 2 (1967): 238.

²⁸ David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Scepter, 2003), 529.

less water might accrue in the tap, altering the volume of each drop, and thus the tempo—or the leak might dry up altogether. So we listen with rapt attention, waiting for the drip to stop.

It has been my experience that our ears strive to find rhythm in every repetition. As a girl, I owned a *papier-mâché* cricket in a wooden box. Every time I lifted the lid, the cricket chirped. I would lift the lid as I listened to the radio, and to my delight, the cricket learned every tune. It did not matter which song. My cricket would chirp the rhythm of Janet Jackson or Alanis Morissette. However, if I listened to the cricket without music, it would chirp a succession of isolated sounds. Henri Lefebvre writes that “repetition is a prerequisite for any rhythm, but not all repetitions engender a rhythm.”²⁹ If this is so, not all falling drops are rhythmic. But what does it mean to describe an entity as more or less rhythmic?

Whether rhythm is defined as a regular beat or continuous flowing, it seems to be “emergent.” That is: rhythm emerges from the communion of people or things in time. Saying this now may appear to pre-empt or contradict the question I posed in the introduction: on whether rhythm precedes or emerges from the text. Paradoxically, both ring true for different reasons—an idea I’ll explore as we move forward. For now, I focus on the “emergent” quality rhythm possesses regardless of how the rhythm is initiated. The drummer communes, in an extension of time, with her tom, just as dancers commune with the drum’s beat (which they cannot identify in an instant, but over time, if only seconds), or the beat of each other. So too, the author communes with her thoughts, the movement in time of her pen across the page, or her fingers on the keyboard. Thus rhythm does not emerge from each item individually (drummer, tom, dancer, author, pen, keyboard as subjects and objects), but from the action in time—the labour (or indeed play) of music-making, dancing and writing. Labour and play continue beyond the execution of one isolated task—or else we would describe them as such. Thus, though repetition alone does not make rhythm, rhythm requires some degree of continuity in time to emerge.

Henri Meschonnic speaks of rhythm in the Benveniste tradition of *rhuthmos* as fluid, moving form. For

²⁹ Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier, “The Rhythmanalytical Project,” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 11, no. 1 (1999): 9.

him, rhythm is language in motion. Like words, whose meanings shift each time we utter them (i.e., as the significance of each word fluctuates with the addition or subtraction of other words, and in the historical moment at which speak them), rhythm is always unique, inseparable from meaning, constructed by the subject at the moment of enunciation.³⁰ If rhythm is in language, in an enunciation, it is the organization (disposition, configuration) of the enunciation. And as the enunciation is not separable from its meaning, rhythm is inseparable too.³¹

It is important to note that Meschonnic's subject is not the author. As rhythm refers to the flow or movement of language, the subject is the *process* of subjectivation: "it is the activity itself, not the person who acts." (Pajević, 313) He defines the poem with similar broadness: it is not the product or work of art (*ergon*), but the activity (*energeia*). (311) We should not consider poetry a literary genre opposed to prose, or even common language. Poetry is an act of common language— like prose and all literature. Meschonnic adopts Benveniste's assertion that rhythm does not denote an organic consistency, but "fits the pattern of a fluid element, of a letter arbitrarily shaped, of a robe which one arranges at one's will..." (Benveniste, 286) A writer shapes and is shaped by her discourse in the very act of borrowing words from the "social cistern of language,"³² an act that is always historicized, or assigned to a particular time and place. That is why Meschonnic defines rhythm as a continuous movement of signification. Rhythm cannot be divorced from what it signifies, or the moment it breaks the surface into words.

By contrast, the definition of rhythm used most often today separates rhythm from what the words represent, from the text's images and thematic content. The text's rhythm "makes its appeal directly to the body— as rhythm in music."³³ Or, as Amittai Aviram paraphrases Archibald MacLeish: "rhythm is

³⁰ Marko Pajević, "Beyond the Sign. Henri Meschonnic's Poetics of the Continuum and of Rhythm: Towards an Anthropological Theory of Language," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 47, no. 3 (2011): 310.

³¹ Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du Rythme: Anthropologie Historique du Langage* (Lagrasse: Editions Verdier, 1982), 70. All further references are included in the text. Original French reads: "Si le rythme est dans le langage, dans un discours, il est une organisation (disposition, configuration) du discours. Et comme le discours n'est pas séparable de son sens, le rythme est inséparable du sens de ce discours."

³² Gabriella Bedetti and Henri Meschonnic, "Interview: Henri Meschonnic," *Diacritics* 18, no. 3 (1988): 93.

³³ Amittai Aviram, *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 114. All further references are included in the text.

that aspect of the poem that does not mean, but is.” (114) In the opening of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche distinguishes between two gods of art: “in the Greek world there exists a huge contrast, in origins and purposes, between visual (plastic) arts, the Apollonian, and the non-visual art of music, the Dionysian.”³⁴ In literature, Apollo represents the images and themes of literature, while Dionysus represents its rhythm. As Apollo spins a warm gauze of dreams, Dionysus reveals something darker: intoxication (*rausch*). We do not contemplate this intoxication, but like rhythm, it compels us to participate. (Aviram, 116) Dionysus represents unfiltered, and thus intoxicating, truth: “a primal unity, having no space, time, or other mode of individuation.” (116-117) Like a solar eclipse, the intoxicating truth would overwhelm us if we confronted it straight on. Apollo provides us with sunglasses. Though we desire to know ourselves through Apollo, and “enlarge the empire of our individual subjectivity,” we have an equally strong urge “to lose ourselves, to become part of something larger in which we are nothing.” (120) Dionysian rhythm provides this break, or caesura, from our Apollonian subjectivity.

Thus we have two interpretations— and bodies of water— for rhythm as it pertains to our subjectivity. For those who understand rhythm by way of Nietzsche’s allegory, rhythm disrupts our solipsism; it marks the caesura, a break from our individual thoughts and dreams, falling drops. For Meschonnic, rhythm is the process of our subjectivity; it is constant movement, language in motion, a flowing stream. In this chapter, I will question this binary. What happens if I tap my foot on the floor? Where is the beat: the moment my foot contacts ground, or the silence before and after: an ongoing silence, perforated by a series of taps. Could rhythm shape *and* break our subjectivity, one leading to the other like a Möbius strip? To further understand the meaning of rhythm, of flow versus pause and our watery metaphors, I will return to the word itself.

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ian Johnston (Nanaimo: Vancouver Island University, 2000), last revised 2009, accessed January 12 2014, http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/tragedy_all.htm.

Etymology

The etymological path of rhythm begins in ancient Greece. The noun *rhuthmos* (*ρϑμός*), as we discussed in the introduction, derives from the verb *rhein* (*ῥέειν*), to flow. In his *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque*, Émile Boisacq defines *ρϑμός* as follows: “*mouvement réglé et mesuré; mesure, cadence, rythme*”: *ῥέω* ‘couler’...*le sens du mot ayant été emprunté au mouvement régulier des flots de la mer.*”³⁵ He not only translates *rhuthmos* as a synonym for measured movement, but also suggests the Greeks first borrowed this word from the regular movement of waves. It is a gratifying link. After all, the tide responds to another rhythm: the lunar cycle. As far as etymology can be primally satisfying, connections between language and the natural world reassure us. Indeed, this connection offers one conventional interpretation of rhythm, as summarized by Benveniste:

This vast unification of man and nature under time, with its intervals and repetitions, has had as a condition the use of the word itself, the generalization, in the vocabulary of modern Western thought, of the term *rhythm*, which comes to us through Latin from Greek. (281)

This interpretation articulates the power we have ascribed to rhythm. First, Benveniste identifies a “unification of man and nature”— of our bodies in nature, our micro-rhythms with a macro-rhythm, and within that macro-rhythm, our bodies with other bodies. If we interpret rhythm this way, as a “generalization,” or abstract noun, the concept invites a certain mysticism. Because the experience of rhythm “exceeds the sphere of ordinary language,” it evokes the same awe and ineffability as the words we use to describe “the thought of God or the view of the Milky Way.” (Aviram, 7) However, the conventional sense of the word rhythm also confines the concept “under [regular] time” and charges it with “intervals and repetitions.” This reduction of the word is at odds with its etymological roots, as well as my experience of rhythm as a fiction writer.

The epiphany asserted by Benveniste is that, in fact, the sea does not flow. A river or stream might

³⁵ Emile Boisacq, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1916), 845, accessed January 25 2014, <https://archive.org/stream/dictionnairety00bois#page/844/mode/2up/search/%22mer+%22>.

flow, but not waves. And unlike waves, rivers are not rhythmic. (282) Benveniste re-constructs a history for the word “rhythm” from its appearance in Ionian texts. For these philosophers— he highlights in particular Leucippus and Democritus— *rhuthmos* is a technical term. According to Democritus, the fundamental relationships among bodies are established by three mutual differences: form, order and position. Democritus uses the word *rhuthmos* to denote form, or the “characteristic arrangement of the parts in a whole.” (283) Thus water differs from air because of the *form* their atoms take. The verbs “to form” and “to transform” stem from this same root. Benveniste cites numerous examples from Ionian prose to support his argument. Both Leucippus and Herodotus employ *rhuthmos* to denote the forms, or signs, of letters. (283) In *The Persians*, Aeschylus uses a verb derived from *rhuthmos* to write: “[Xerxes, in his madness] wanted to transform a strait.” (284) Meschonnic echoes this usage later when he describes the poem as not a text or literary genre, but the “process of transformation.” (Pajević, 312) As outlined in the introduction, from its earliest appearance, *rhuthmos* and its derivatives mean form, not measured rhythm or the movement of waves.

However, the same writers employed a number of words to express form, such as *skhēma* (σχῆμα.) Where does the meaning of *rhuthmos* diverge? To demonstrate the word’s nuances, and indeed, to restore a sense of flow, Benveniste examines how *rhuthmos* functions in a sentence. Specifically, he highlights the suffix *-(θ)μός*, which implies “not the accomplishment of the notion, but the particular modality of its accomplishment as it is presented to the eyes.” (285) By this description, I would compare the suffix to that of a grammatical verbal, which I will discuss in the coming chapters. In a verbal, the verb metamorphoses into a different part of speech. Take the verb “to dance.” I could write, *Socrates dances*, which conjugates the verb in the active present tense. If I convert the verb into a present participle verbal, however, it functions as an adjective. *Dancing Socrates*. Now, this is an interesting shift, because the present participle *dancing* is not conjugated with a tense. *Socrates* is *dancing* outside of time. We could deploy the same word as a hybrid between verb and noun— a gerund.³⁶ *Socrates enjoys dancing*. Dancing

³⁶ Note that I am speaking analogically. The Greek language does not include gerunds. Note too that the third type of verbal also combines verb and noun: infinitives. *Socrates loves to dance*.

acts as a noun in this sentence—the object of Socrates’ enjoyment—but the verb remains inscribed within it like a palimpsest.

Here is where *rhuthmos* (ρῦθμός) begins to turn in on itself. The nuance of its suffix, which implies the “modality of its accomplishment as it is presented to the eyes,” demonstrates the very flow and transformation signified by the word’s meaning. To return to our example of dancing: ὄρχησις (*orkhēsis*) refers to dance as a completed act, whereas ὄρχηθμός refers to dance as it takes place. (285) This distinction leads to the difference between *skhēma* (σχῆμα) and *rhuthmos*. *Skhēma* refers to a fixed form, or shape. By contrast, *rhuthmos* describes the form “in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid...” (285-286) The word *rhuthmos* itself implies a hybrid between noun and action, form and flow, the flow of that form.

Stream / Falling Drops

If we interpret “falling drops” as beats, the metaphor aligns with a distinction between rhythm as a concept and rhythm as it manifests itself in the text. In Nietzsche’s allegory, we are ill-equipped to speak about the more abstract concept of rhythm, or express it in a poem, without Apollo. Dionysus represents rhythm as a primal unity, even a primal pain, that is so intoxicating we can only catch it in glimpses—infrequent breaks in our subjectivity. Aviram notes that we can observe Dionysus as a positive principle as well: our desire to lose ourselves in something larger.

These Dionysian moments, so to speak, are the only occasions we have to transcend the doubts that language imposes upon us, doubts as to whether we understand each other and are understood, doubts that seem to sentence us to a tragic solitude that we feel continually at the core of our experience. The drive to be relieved of this solitude and of everything else that comes with it... finds eloquent testimony everywhere, from the crowds that flock to rock concerts to the groups of men and women labourers singing wistful work songs as they toil. (Aviram, 121)

In this interpretation of Nietzsche’s allegory, the content of a text— its themes and images, and even the

words used— are threads of Apollo’s illusory veil. However, the experience of a text, as the experience of a song, allows us a break in our subjectivity. For Meschonnic, however, rhythm is the very process of “subjectivation.” The meaning of a text cannot be divorced from its rhythm.

Though we should distinguish between rhythms in a text and the concept of rhythm, a reader’s experience of the former can perhaps lead to the greater, transcendental experience of the latter. I do not mean to suggest fireworks or steam coiling from our ears, or that we will read a passage of Joyce and all begin to levitate. I speak of those moments where a line catches our eye. Where we read the same passage seven times over because we like how it sounds— because we cannot get it out of our head. I think literature transforms us this way. As music transforms us. Perhaps this transformative quality echoes our distinction between rhythm and repetition. Unlike repetition, rhythm involves a communion in time that brings renewal. Henri Lefebvre writes, “the movement of cycles has the allure of both an advent and an event. Although its beginning is just a recommencement, it has the freshness of a discovery or an invention.” Advent and event, and indeed “invention” in this excerpt, derive from the past participle of the latin verb, *venire*, to come. The nuances between the meanings come from the different prefixes. The preposition *ad-* means at, to, toward, while *ex-* (which becomes *e-* before certain consonants) means out or out of. *Advenire* thus means “to come to” or “arrive,” whereas *evenire* means “to come out of.” In medieval philosophy, event denotes an outcome, while advent implies an act where a supernatural agent comes down from outside time or a higher realm.³⁷ The drip of a faucet can be thought of as a “linear” repetition. It presents itself as “monotonous, weary, and even intolerable.” (Lefebvre and Régulier, 7) Rhythm, with its continuum between event and advent, the world and otherworldly, bears a greater resemblance to the circles of nature:

Cyclical movements and processes are countless; they range from molecules (the microscopic) to galaxies (the astronomic) with all the movements that can be accounted for in

³⁷ Lyman A. Baker, “Glossary of Terms: ‘Advent’ vs ‘Event,’” *English 233: Introduction to Western Humanities - Baroque & Enlightenment*, 1999, accessed February 7 2014, <http://www-personal.ksu.edu/~lyman/english233/g-advent-vs-event.htm>.

between, from the beats of the heart, to the movements of the eye, to the alternation of the day and night, to the change of months and seasons. (Lefebvre and Régulier, 7)

Why do we sometimes read a line of Woolf, or Nabokov, and immediately re-read it? Not from mis-comprehension or fatigue, but pleasure— to replay that near physical frisson of delight we received the first time. The line moved us somehow— its rhythm moved us, renewed us. In the same way that “there is always something miraculously charming about the rising of the sun,” or “something wonderful about the renewal of hunger and thirst.” (Lefebvre and Régulier, 6) How appropriate that the original, Ionic understanding of *rhuthmos* derived the verb “to transform”: “(Xerxes, in his madness) wanted to transform a strait”; “instruction transforms man.” (Benveniste, 283-284) Now what I desire to know is this: if a reader, or jazz listener, or sunrise watcher, experiences rhythm as renewal, how do we experience rhythm as writers?

How Rhythm Feels

To begin to answer this question, I find it helpful to survey other writers’ descriptions of rhythm. Because the words they use to describe rhythm are inherently rhythmic, and thus also at stake, I find it necessary to include three longer quotations in full.

In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf writes:

Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can’t use the wrong words. But on the other hand here am I sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can’t dislodge them for lack of the right rhythm. Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then,

as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it.³⁸

Don DeLillo, in conversation with *The Paris Review*, writes:

There's a rhythm I hear that drives me through a sentence. And the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. They form odd correspondences. They match up not just through meaning but through sound and look. The rhythm of a sentence will accommodate a certain number of syllables. One syllable too many, I look for another word. There's always another word that means nearly the same thing, and if it doesn't then I'll consider altering the meaning of a sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat. I'm completely willing to let language press meaning upon me. Watching the way in which words match up, keeping the balance in a sentence—these are sensuous pleasures.³⁹

Amy Hempel, also in conversation with *The Paris Review*, writes:

Often I've started a story knowing the beat, the rhythm of the first line or first paragraph, but without knowing what the words are. I'll be doing the equivalent of humming a tune over and over again and then this tune will be translated into a sentence. So I might be thinking, *da-da-da-da-da-da-dadada*, that'll become, "*Tell me things I won't mind forgetting*," which is the first line of "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried." And I trust that. There's something visceral about the musical quality of a sentence. I often end stories that way too. I'll know what sound I want, and know what I don't want. Not gentle, maybe something else, and I'll go at it that way, which is a lot of fun. It can be about where the stress falls. If you get a masculine ending in a sentence where the stress hits the final syllable of the word, it just holds more strongly to the

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, "Letter to Vita Sackville-West (March 1926)," *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* Vol. III, edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975–80), 247.

³⁹ Adam Begley and Don DeLillo, "Don DeLillo, The Art of Fiction No. 135," *The Paris Review* No. 128 (1993), accessed February 7 2014, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1887/the-art-of-fiction-no-135-don-delillo>.

page. So that you get “and *wait*” instead of “and *waiting*.” There’s less trailing off. You can call up emotions with the sound of words, no matter what the words mean. You can really get under someone’s skin that way, especially if you’re writing about something upsetting in words that soothe. There’s the famous Philip Larkin poem that gets a good deal of its impact from a rhythm like children jumping rope, jarringly contrasting with the words: “They fuck you up, your mum and dad...”⁴⁰

As I shared in the introduction, the work I am most proud of emerged from an interior movement or sway. The writers I have included describe a similar sensation: “A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind long before it makes words to fit it.” The rhythm Don DeLillo hears “drives [him] through the sentence.” Amy Hempel starts by humming. At the beginning of this chapter, I spoke of the *emergent* quality of rhythm—how rhythm appears to emerge from the labour/play of writing in time. It also feels true to describe rhythm as a primal “first-mover.” By that, I don’t mean meter, or grafting syllables onto a preset choreography. I can describe it as a breath. A vital puff that pushes words into being. Martin Heidegger describes a similar phenomenon in poetry, though his words apply equally to prose. Like Woolf, he invokes the metaphor of waves:

From the site of the poem there rises the wave that in each instance moves his Saying (*sagen*) as poetic. But that wave, far from leaving the site behind, in its rise causes all the movement of Saying to flow back to its ever more hidden source. The site of the poem, as the source of the animating wave, holds within it the veiled essence of what, to metaphysical representation, can at best appear as rhythm.⁴¹

This animating wave does not cease to impress us after it sets language into motion. The same source from which the work arises “continually pervades and animates the poems,” and it is toward this source

⁴⁰ Amy Hempel and Paul Winner, “Amy Hempel, The Art of Fiction No. 176,” *The Paris Review* No. 176 (2003), accessed February 7 2014, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/227/the-art-of-fiction-no-176-amy-hempel>.

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, “Language in the Poem: A Discussion on Georg Trakl’s Poetic Work,” *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc, 1971), 160.

that they “continually signal.”⁴² But Heidegger does not shed light on how to find the site of the poem, the *hidden source* of the animating wave, which is what I’m interested in as a writer. Still, this quote resonates with the descriptions of rhythm from the above authors, as well as my own experience, to a degree.

Heidegger’s theory also echoes Lefebvre’s continuum between event and advent, and another continuum: between caesura and flow.

Stream / Falling Drops

Derrida’s play on words, *la brisure*, illuminates the double-function of the caesura, which interrupts and structures a text. *La brisure*, the hinge, signifies a break at the same time it implies that which links a break. “Brisure” is also the word used to indicate the variation in a coat of arms that distinguishes branches of a family.⁴³ Thus the hinge signals differentiation at the same time it carries familial resemblance. Gratifyingly, heraldry’s system of distinguishing coats of arms is known as “cadency.” Cadence, of course, is another word for flow—and rhythm.⁴⁴

In the first section of this essay, I pitched rhythm as a Möbius strip, which both shapes and breaks our subjectivity. I would like to return to this theory via Heidegger: “Rhythm, *rhuthmos*, does not mean flux and flowing, but rather structure. Rhythm is what is at rest, what structures the movement of dance and song, and thus lets it rest within itself.”⁴⁵ Heidegger’s observation contradicts the metaphor of flow that we uncovered with Benveniste’s etymology—but what if the opposition is a false one? Explanations of rhythm often invoke motion. When we speak of rhythm in prose or poetry, we use words to describe a line’s tempo, i.e. the speed of its movement. Similarly, rhythm seduces our bodies into motion: the tap of

⁴² David Nowell Smith, “The Art of the Fugue: Heidegger on Rhythm,” *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual* 2 (2012): 53.

⁴³ Wolfreys, “Différance and Writing,” *Derrida*, 67.

⁴⁴ See Dennis Lee, who uses “cadence” interchangeably with rhythm in *Body Music* (1998).

⁴⁵ Heidegger, “Words,” *On The Way to Language*, 149.

our shoe to a bass line, or even the swing of our eyes across a page. But these experiences of rhythm do not contradict the notion of rhythm as rest. A dancer may know a rhythm so intimately, she adopts it into muscle memory. Likewise, a practiced runner rests in the rhythm of her footfalls—a phenomenon known as “flow state.” Virginia Woolf sits there half the morning, unable to dislodge her words until she finds a rhythm she can sink into. I feel the same way as a writer. That is why the “pre-rhythmic” blank page feels so daunting. For Heidegger, time does not appear to us as a series of “nows,” but rather, a “movement through which what appears ‘now’ emerges from out of and withdraws into the double absence of having-been and futurity.”⁴⁶ Amittai Aviram phrases the movement another way: “Between the anticipation of the beat and the memory of its fulfillment, there opens a space—the Heideggerian space in which Being is disclosed.”⁴⁷ Rhythm as rest does not imply an absence of motion, or flow. On the contrary, this rest represents a state of “extreme agitation,”⁴⁸ anterior to word.

Between the anticipation of the beat and the memory of its fulfillment. Between the tread of our next step, and the silence that surrounds it. Between a drop of water and the plurality of drops that fall into a stream. “Maybe the only thing that hints at a sense of Time is rhythm,” writes Nabokov. “Not the recurrent beats of the rhythm, but the gap between such beats, the grey gap between black beats: the tender interval.”⁴⁹ I wonder if we can think of this continuum between rest and flow, emerging and preceding, the drop and the stream, like a traffic jam. Those tremendous traffic jams you see on the news, or from a plane over New York City—eight lanes of cars inching in, I am sure, a state of extreme agitation. From our plane, we cannot discern distinct cars, but their headlights form a snake, a splendid illumination that appears a still line. As a line of ants appears still, or the cells in our bloodstream. As a

⁴⁶ Smith, “The Art of the Fugue,” 43.

⁴⁷ Amittai Aviram, “The Meaning of Rhythm,” *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History*, edited by Massimo Verdicchio and Robert Burch (New York: Continuum, 2002), 169.

⁴⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 26.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: a Family Chronicle* (London: Penguin UK, 2000), 421.

caesura divides and collides speech.⁵⁰ As it hinges. As a verbal imparts verb and noun, motion and stillness, and in that stillness, a constant flow. Perhaps rhythm occupies both registers. Perhaps writers experience rhythm as the sway or motion that breaks the surface into words, which emerges from those words, and readers experience rhythm as pause, a perforation in their subjectivity, which reveals the flow that, for writers, breaks the surface into words and emerges from those words. The rhythms we scan in a text glimpse at the greater flow, a sublime rhythm that renews us, like sunrise or hunger, which sways our hips in a rock concert, or compels us to read the opening passage of a book seven times before we turn the page. After all, what is any stream but a multitude of drops?

⁵⁰ Josh McLoughlin, "Madness & Jouissance: Friedrich Hölderlin, Walter Benjamin & Gerard Manley Hopkins," *Sonder*, posted April 30, 2015, <https://sondermag.wordpress.com/2015/04/30/madness-bliss>

II

Rhythm as a Metaphor for Presence

In the last chapter, I introduced the concept of rhythm with a discussion of its watery metaphors. I now turn to rhythm as a metaphor itself in discussions of presence in literary fiction. First, I will identify and unpick the prevailing metaphor for presence—voice. Second, I will draw upon Jacques Derrida’s critique of Saussurian linguistics to unravel the historic veneration of presence in theories of speech and writing. Third, I will explore the distinction between conventional and creative metaphors and pitch rhythm as an alternative, more “vital” metaphor for presence in literary fiction. Once I have laid the theoretical brickwork, which will occupy the bulk of the chapter, I will illustrate the need for a less phonocentric metaphor in discussions of style with a close reading of Jonathan Safran Foer’s story, “A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease.” Though I draw upon Derrida in this essay, my project does not aspire toward a deconstruction of rhythm or any other concept. As I acknowledge in the introduction, I have approached this project with a somewhat eclectic methodology—drawing from different theories to articulate ideas I am pursuing as a creative writer. To understand the notion of “presence” in literary fiction, I have found Derrida’s deconstructions very helpful, as well as Geoffrey Bennington’s interpretation of his ideas, which I have also drawn upon. The theme of bridges recurs here when Bennington clarifies that the goal of deconstruction is not refutation, “but to *cross* [the] text and leave in it the trace or wake of this crossing.”⁵¹ Though I am not a deconstructionist, I too would like to “cross” these concepts and imagine them as bridges that link and support my exploration of rhythm in prose.

⁵¹ Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 63. All further references are included in the text.

Voice Metaphor

Over my five years of fiction workshops, the term “voice” has been ubiquitous. I have heard it outside the classroom too, in literary reviews, endorsements, newspaper ads and book fairs. Often, voice constitutes entire chapters of creative writing guides, like Andrew Cowan’s, *The Art of Writing Fiction*, or the similarly titled *The Art of Fiction* by David Lodge. If not comprising an entire chapter, the term will be discussed in sections on point of view and character, or peppered throughout the book, as in John Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, Elmore Leonard’s *10 Rules of Writing*, or *Zen in the Art of Writing* by Ray Bradbury. In an essay that ultimately defends voice as a critical term, Peter Elbow acknowledges how commonly the word is used in a “loose and celebratory way,” as a “warm fuzzy word” people apply if the writing has some virtue they cannot articulate.⁵² The examples in book endorsements are rife: *Time* Magazine describes Lena Dunham as, “A Generation’s Gutsy, Ambitious Voice.”⁵³ Miranda July’s publishers at Simon and Schuster describe her as, “a spectacularly original, iconic, and important voice.”⁵⁴ Cormac McCarthy paradoxically “gives voice to the unspeakable” in a *New York Times* Review.⁵⁵ Other popular voice clichés include: “new voice,” “writer’s voice,” “found her voice,” “yet to find her voice,” “loud voice,” (especially if the narrator speaks in dialect like Irvine Welsh), “quiet voice,” (if the prose is spare or unadorned), “authentic voice,” “unconvincing voice.” These disparate and often hyperbolic uses cloud the meaning of the term as a viable critical concept. In the

⁵² Peter Elbow, “What Do We Mean When We Talk About Voices in Texts?,” *Voices on Voice: Perspective, Definitions, Inquiry*, ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey (Illinois: National Council of English, 1994), 2. All further references are included in the text.

⁵³ Roxanne Gay, “Lena Dunham: A Generation’s Gutsy, Ambitious Voice,” *Time*, posted September 24 2014, <http://time.com/3425759/lena-dunham-a-generations-gutsy-ambitious-voice/>

⁵⁴ “The First Bad Man: A Novel,” *Amazon*, posted January 13 2014, <http://www.amazon.com/The-First-Bad-Man-Novel/dp/1439172560>

⁵⁵ Janet Maslin, “The Road Through Hell, Paved With Desperation,” *New York Times*, posted September 25 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/25/books/25masl.html>

Dunham and July examples, the word voice implies a “spirit” or zeitgeist. In writing workshops and how-to guides, the word voice means everything from the author’s individual style (by way of syntax, diction, punctuation and tone), as well as narrative persona (observable in the first person narrator or other point of view protagonist), and the character voices we hear in dialogue. Before I continue, I will say that I use the word “voice” myself. It is a helpful term when used mindfully. Voice describes the tone of characters in fiction; it describes the mood of a piece, and an author’s signature style. However, our reliance on the word is problematic for four reasons.

First, many reviewers and writers have forgotten that “voice” is a metaphor. Voice is the sound produced by a person’s larynx, released by the mouth. Fictional characters do not have larynges. Once we forget the comparison is an analogy, the connection loses its potency. We use the phrase casually and without thought. Second, our fixation on “voice” encourages idolization of the “writer’s voice,” which is a fiction. Not every writer has a voice they must find like a stylistic spirit guide. Characters have voices; narrators have voices; novels and stories do not have voices, but characters and narrators with voices. (Novels and stories may however have different styles or moods.) When new writers are encouraged to “find their voice,” it implies there is only one style for them. Such advice promotes complacency and monotony over a body of work. Third, because we forget voice is a metaphor, the abbreviation enables imprecise thinking. We describe a short story as “a voice piece” (a phrase that appears in workshop more often than you would think) when we mean any number of things, like “Scotch dialect,” “purple prose,” “experimental language,” “overbearing narrator,” “compelling narrator.” Finally, over-reliance on the word “voice” enables a fixation on utterance, which omits the utterance-less features of literary fiction (the pacing of whitespace, punctuation, etc.). Particularly, the voice-metaphor excludes stories that reach beyond words, such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s “A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease,” which I will discuss later in this chapter.

In “White Mythology,” Derrida states that a good metaphor for Aristotle “has the virtues of putting something before our eyes, making a picture, having a lively effect; and these virtues are regularly

associated with the notion of *energeia*.”⁵⁶ However, a metaphor only packs energy if the resemblance is not identity. “*Mimesis* brings pleasure only if it allows us to see in action what is nevertheless not given in action itself, but only in its very similar double.” (39) Derrida describes this gap between mimed and mimer as an energy-carrying absence, a “mysterious break... that creates stories and scenes.” (40) Thus when we forget the gap between the literal word “voice” and its meaning in literary discourse, the metaphor deflates. In the last essay, we spoke of a similar break: the caesurae, or “falling drops,” of a beat. Anne Danielsen conceives rhythm as “an interaction of something sounding and something not sounding.”⁵⁷ If the space (or *spacing*) between sounding and not sounding (or presence and absence, signifier and signified) could be experienced as a break *and* a continuous flow, perhaps the same could be said for metaphor. The gap between mimed and mimer invokes delight— as a parody of the Queen invokes delight, when an actor identical to Elizabeth II would not. Perhaps we experience this schism between mimed and mimer as a break *and* continuous flow of meaning— in the same way that our mind links the cuts between film frames. The parody of the queen makes us laugh because of a. the gap, but also b. the recognition, which stems from pre-existing concepts of the royal family. The break between actor and queen does not distract us, but sustains a flow of meaning we have already entertained or observed elsewhere. For Derrida, we ought to identify the original inscription in a metaphor and “restore the palimpsest.” (10) He quotes Nietzsche’s, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”:

What then is the truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymics, anthropomorphisms... truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses, coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal.” (15)

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 39. All further references are included in the text.

⁵⁷ Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure – The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 46-47. All further references are included in the text.

Thus it is in the difference—the space between the tenor and vehicle of a metaphor—that we find energy and meaning.

As I have stated, voice is a helpful metaphor in discussions of style—one I use myself. However, the word's ubiquitousness in both institutional and commercial contexts has diluted its potency as a critical term. To restore the “concentrate” of its meaning, Elbow identifies five types of voice in written texts: audible voice, dramatic voice, recognizable or distinctive voice, voice with authority, and finally, resonant voice or presence. (6-16) The first four types of voice in texts are straightforward and do not pose any critical problems I wish to explore here. However, as Elbow admits, the notion of presence as resonant voice is swampy. He explains that:

at certain lucky or achieved moments, writers or speakers do manage to find words which seem to capture the rich complexity of the unconscious; or words which, though they do not express or articulate everything that is in the unconscious, nevertheless seem to resonate with or have behind them the unconscious as well as the conscious... It is words of this sort that we experience as resonant—and through them we have a sense of presence with the writer.” (18)

The question to the writer is not “how sincere are you?” but rather, “how much of yourself did you manage to get behind the words?” (20) We find a text resonant when we recognize the lived experience behind it, a body humming or beating beneath the page. But whose body is this? The writer's? The character's? A character inspired by the writer's mother? A film the writer saw? A poem? The question of author identity is not a problem I will address here, but it does contribute to the murk of resonant voice as presence in writing. I would like to return to what I said above, about bodies humming, or beating, *resounding* beneath the text. The word “resonate” comes from the Latin *resonare*, or sound again, literally: re-sound. I agree with Peter Elbow that some accomplished writers achieve this effect in their work; it is a quality I aspire toward. However, and this is my primary argument in this chapter: I attribute that “resonance” to rhythm. Recall Danielsen's definition of rhythm as “an interaction of something sounding and something not sounding.” That is—the gap, or spacing, between sounding and resounding.

In his essay, “How to Write,” William Carlos Williams states that poets are “in touch with ‘voices,’ but ... the voices are the past, the depths of our very beings. It is the deeper...portions of the personality speaking, the middle brain, the nerves, the glands, the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking.”⁵⁸ Can that depth be contained in our vocal cords? When we speak of our bodies beneath the text, of our middle brains and glands and muscles, are we still speaking about voice? Or do we mean heartbeats, breath, rhythm?

“Presence” in Speech and Writing

According to Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics, a sign is a sign; as Geoffrey Bennington paraphrases, the sign “stands in for the thing in its absence, representing it in view of its return...” (24) In his *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Saussure names this sign the signifier, which is distant enough from the signified of the thing in itself, the referent, that it functions as a delegate. Historically, philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau and Hegel have interpreted graphic signifiers (written word) as the transcription of phonic signifiers (spoken word), and thus presumed writing, as signs of signs, to be “derivative,” and “exterior.” In this view, writing functions to represent speech; it is a “signifier of the first signifier, representation of the self-present voice, of the immediate, natural, and direct signification of the meaning.”⁵⁹ Saussure retains a traditional definition of writing, inherited from Plato and Aristotle, which does not consider non-alphabetic languages such as Chinese, or indeed non-linguistic writing, such as algebra and musical scores. For Saussure, “language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the

⁵⁸ William Carlos Williams, *Interviews with William Carlos Williams*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (New York: *New Directions*, 1976), 98.

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 30. All further references are included in the text.

second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first.”⁶⁰ Derrida questions the workings of that hierarchy: “this *factum* of phonetic writing is massive; it commands our entire culture and science... Nevertheless it does not respond to any necessity of an absolute and universal essence.” (30-31) Derrida describes the condemnation of writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus*; it is “the intrusion of an artful technique, a forced entry of a totally original sort, an archetypal violence: eruption of the *outside* within the *inside*, breaching into the interiority of the soul.” (34) Speech, nearer to the realm of ideas, acquires the status of the soul, whereas writing, “the letter, the sensible inscription, has been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit...” (35) Writing inverts the “natural” relationship between the soul, mind, and body. It veils language, allows us to *hide behind our words* or write without *showing our faces*. For Saussure, writing is a “garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise...” (35) The “natural bond” of the signified to the phonic signifier has been compromised and inverted “by the original sin of writing.” (35) Indeed, the metaphors embedded in our discourse reflect this notion of writing as corporeal and “fallen.” We write *down*, jot *down*, scribble *down* notes at the same time that we speak *out*, talk *to*. We say *body* of an essay or argument, *body* of work; when we parse sentences, we dissect clauses into *parts* of speech. (Interestingly, speech remains the dominant metaphor here, though parsing is a grammar exercise that occurs primarily on the page, like mathematics.) If we employ a comparable set of metaphors to describe spoken word, it is temporal rather than spatial—the “duration” of a speech or talk, rather than “body.” Saussure hoped his science of language would “recover the natural—that is, the simple and original—relationships between speech and writing” and “restore its absolute youth and the purity of its origin.” (35)

Derrida deflated the hierarchy of signified over signifier by deconstructing the distinction between them. After all, “the signified is just a signifier put in a certain position by other signifiers.” (31) That is, “every signifier functions by referring to other signifiers, without one ever arriving at a signified.” (33) If

⁶⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 23. All further references are included in the text.

we encounter a foreign word, or signifier we do not recognize, we look it up in the dictionary. What do we find there? Not the signified, or meaning of the word in itself, but more signifiers. Further, the repetition of a signifier will vary its sound or appearance by differences in accent, tone and writing style. We recognize signs despite these discrepancies, which implies the “sameness” through repetitions must be an “ideal-ity”— “the signifier is thus never purely or essentially sensible, even at the level of its phonological or graphological description.” (32) The identity of the sign is ensured only by its difference from other signs and concepts; thus the “matter or stuff from which it seemed that signifiers were cut out, as it were, disappears from the essential definition of the sign,” which undermines the tendency of linguistics to privilege voice over writing. (33)

To return to our bodies, speech signifies life more than writing. When two people talk in real time, they are necessarily alive and forming words with their tongues. Writing, by contrast, is inherently elegiac; these words represent me in my absence, and will do so after my death. This fact leads Bennington to write that his “mortality... is thus inscribed in everything [he] inscribes.” (51) Further, he (and I) write in the absence of you, “because you are far away... and could be dead before my text reaches you.” (51) Every sign necessitates the possibility of its repetition or reiteration, otherwise it would not be a sign. Because of this necessity, the “present presentation of meaning” (for instance, the sentence I am typing right now), is always shadowed by the possibility of its reproduction (the sentence you are reading right now.) By virtue of the fact that we write and speak in signs, the difference between the original expression and its repetition, and therefore between presence and non-presence, has already begun to soften. You may read this sentence, the one I am currently typing, again and again in your “present,” which may be weeks or years from my present; “the blink of the present instant (the *Augenblick*) is thus haunted from the start by a past and a future.” (69) It is impossible to reconcile the privilege of presence in metaphysical thought with the necessity of a sign’s reiteration. The traditional notion of ideality rests on the idea of infinite progress, and the supposition that truth is the objective expression of “an infinite and immortal rational consciousness.” (70) However, “the iterability of the sign in general, without which

there would be no ideality, implies, through its indifference to whether I am alive or dead, the finitude of any subject or consciousness, and the originary possibility of representation and fiction...which forbids any discourse, even that of philosophy, from being essentially directed by truth.” (70) To highlight the underpinning theme of metaphysics (and the dualism between writing and speech) it is worth drawing attention to two logical moments outlined by Bennington. First, of presence: “of the world to a gaze, of a consciousness to its own inspection, of a meaning to a mind, of life to itself, of a breast to a mouth.” (17-18) The second is absence: “the world veiled, consciousness astray, nonsense, death, debauchery, language, weaning.” (18) By deriving the second moment from the first, we return the complex to the simple, words to our mouth, the fallen to the exalted. However, with the analytic necessity of a sign’s repetition, presence loses its privilege over absence. We may read books for the first time whether the author is alive or dead, and we may read them again and again, until *we* are dead. Our reading of a text is not impacted by the representation (as opposed to the present presentation) of the author’s words. If graphic signifiers are not necessarily subordinate to phonic signifiers, if the signified is merely a signifier differentiated by other signifiers, and if the essential repeatability of the sign usurps the hierarchy of presence over absence, truth over fiction, spirit over body, then what are the repercussions for “presence” in literary prose? Should I, as a fiction writer, still strive to produce *vital* writing by way of *animated* language, and *lively* characters? The answer, for me, is: “of course.” But why? Is vital writing necessarily preferable to “dead writing”? Why do we speak in terms of life?

In her poem, “Poetry III,” Adrienne Rich describes writing that carries the burden of our lives somehow: “Even if every word we wrote by then / were honest, the sheer heft / of our living behind it...”⁶¹ Note that she does not write “burden of life,” or “our lives,” as I did, but “heft of our *living*.” There is a difference, here. The gerund, *living*, implies a process, a going on that feeds our words, in this case, while the noun

⁶¹ Adrienne Rich, “Poetry III,” *Dickinson Electronic Archives*, accessed February 2015, <http://www.emilydickinson.org/titanic-operas/folio-one/adrienne-rich>

“life” contains its meaning in a temporally discrete unit. From Elbow’s concept of resonant voice, which I discussed above, it is important to take away two thoughts: first, vital writing could describe a process, rather than an attainable *telos*. Second, vital writing carries a burden, a weight, which suggests a body, perhaps our bodies. What if we tried the same grammar bending with the notion of presence in writing? The gerund “presenting”⁶² internalizes presence as practice, or a work in progress, rather than an objective good on which to hinge a hierarchy of expression. The gerund “presenting” is not confined by tense into a discrete temporal unit, and thus its distinction with “representing” blurs. The gerund “presenting” is not closed, or a substance, but a form, a becoming, a sipping without finishing the glass. Its grammar echoes Derrida’s concept of “spacing.”

In response to Saussure’s account of speech’s passivity to language, Derrida outlines the relationship of the “fundamental unconsciousness of language” and its “spacing (pause, blank, punctuation, interval in general, etc.) which constitutes the origin of signification.”⁶³ He writes:

Spacing (notice that this word speaks the articulation of space and time, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space) is always the unperceived, the nonpresent and the nonconscious... Arche-writing as spacing cannot occur *as such* within the phenomenological experience of a *presence*. It marks the *dead time* within the presence of the living present, within the general form of all presence. The dead time is at work.” (68)

When we write fiction, the presenting and living behind our words are likewise *at work*. They denote a becoming, not a substance that has achieved its final form. Derrida writes further that writing is “the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject. By the movement of its drift/derivation [dérive] the emancipation of the sign constitutes in return the desire of presence...As the subject’s

⁶² The proximity to Heidegger’s “presencing” here was unintended (and unrecognized) at time of writing, though the modifications are based on similar grammatical nuances. I retain “presenting” rather than “presencing” to preserve echoes of “the present” (in time and space) as well as the word “represent(-ing).” Moreover, “presenting” is a gerund constructed from the verb “to present,” while “presencing” is the opposite—a verb-form constructed from the noun “presence.”

⁶³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 68

relationship with its own death, this becoming,” or the drift/derivation, “is the constitution of subjectivity.” (69) Writing constitutes and dislocates the subject at the same time. In the same way that *rhuthmos* connoted “forming” before Plato pinned it down as pattern and metre, we may think of “vital” prose as becoming, presenting, drifting, hefting our living, constituting and dislocating. Perhaps we can even liken Rich’s “sheer heft of living,” the marks and bruises a writer leaves on her work, to Derrida’s concept of trace. Because the meaning of a sign is generated from its distinction (and *différance*) from other signs, it carries a trace of its non-meaning. For example, we cannot understand the word “woman” without evoking the concept of non-woman, or man. Trace is the mark of absence— “the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing.” (70) The spatial and objective exteriority would not appear without:

the nonpresence inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present...The presence-absence of the trace, which one should not even call its ambiguity but rather its play (for the word “ambiguity” requires the logic of presence, even when it begins to disobey that logic), carries in itself the problems of the letter and the spirit, of body and soul, and of all the problems whose primary affinity I have recalled.

(70-71)

In fiction writing, our characters are not “present” in any material sense of the word, but in good writing, we feel the weight of experience behind them, the bruises they bear. The writer “plays” the “presence-absence” of the characters’ experience like an instrument, and in the writing that follows, we will find problems of letter and spirit, body and soul. This problem of body and soul, of how to inject “soul” into the non-present (or non-material) bodies of our characters, and our bodies of work, has commonly been addressed with the phonocentric bias that inspired Derrida to challenge Saussure’s linguistics in the first place. To draw nearer to what we mean by presence in literary fiction, I am pitching rhythm as a fresher and more “vital” metaphor than voice.

Rhythm as a “creative” metaphor

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson explore how people understand whole systems of concepts through other, more familiar ideas.⁶⁴ Metaphors make one domain of experience comprehensible by describing it in terms of another. According to their theory, our basic domain of experience is human nature: our interactions with other people, the physical environment and our own bodies. Some concepts like love, time and happiness, are not clear enough in their own terms to describe our day-to-day experiences, so we ground them in our interaction with physical and cultural environments. (118-119) They compare two types of metaphor: conventional— like “love is a journey” and “love is war”— or imaginative and creative, which challenges cliché and offers new insight. Their example of an imaginative metaphor is “love is a collaborative work of art.” (135) Like any analogy, this comparison hides and highlights certain properties (of love) to provide a coherent structure of meaning. They suggest that the qualities we choose to emphasize or omit in a metaphor provide feedback that guides our future actions. (141) If we live by the understanding that love is a collaborative work of art, we minimize the passive dimensions of love (ex. “love is madness and I am not accountable”) and maximize love as a special activity, or “collaboration.” Love gains new meaning and presents an alternative way to be in the world. The metaphor does not passively reflect reality, but can change or construct it.

Like love, the components of literary fiction are not clear in their own terms. We rely on metaphors like “voice,” as well as “style,” “structure,” tone,” “mood,” “plot,” “story arc,” “setting,” and “point of view.” In the spirit of Lakoff and Johnson, I suggest that rhythm is a creative, rather than reflective, metaphor for “presence” (or “presenting”) and resonance in literary fiction. Like the love metaphor, the concept that resonant writing is rhythm highlights key features: resonant writing, or presence, is *vital*, linked to pulse and breath; it is sounding and not sounding (resounding); resonant

⁶⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 116. All further references are included in the text.

writing involves words, but not always; resonant writing is music; it is dance, and muscular; resonant writing identifies us like a gait (but we may try out other gaits); resonant writing is hypnotic; it is involuntary (and voluntary). Unlike the resonance (or presence) is voice metaphor, the concept that resonant writing is rhythm downplays the notion of literature as monotonous, phonocentric, or the signature of its author, and highlights its power as vital, muscular and musical.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, certain lines of literature burrow into our minds. We all have them — sentences we have pocketed, a line we could not get out of our head, or simply chains of words that sparked a frisson when we first read them. For me it's the first paragraph of *Lolita*, or the following line in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*: "All of us are better when we're loved." When I talk about rhythm, I do not mean simply metre, or rhetoric, or structure, but the resonance that emerges from these parts. To draw a comparison, if I may, to rap music: Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen speaks of a "feeling" that rises from the performed hip hop groove and flow. She applies Wittgenstein's concept of "gesture" to rap: the linguistic gesture, which creates meaning through tone and rhythm in language, and musical gesture, which uses accentuation, intensity and timbre.⁶⁵ In a similar vein, Robert Walser asserts that "the rhythmic placement of the phrases creates polyrhythmic tension...The music is not an accompaniment to textual delivery; rather voice and instrumental tracks are placed in a more dynamic relationship in hip hop, as the rapper interacts with the rest of the music."⁶⁶ That is— musical notation cannot represent the nuances of sound and timbre. Nor can notation represent the "micro-rhythms" in rap music, which inspire that "certain feeling that music creates." (Pederson, 4) Likewise, no scansion could translate the resonance echoing from a rhythmic line, whether the line is delivered in a sonnet or eight-hundred page novel. Rhythm is more than counting syllables. Or, as Pedersen writes, rhythm "reveals itself in between the

⁶⁵ Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen, "Anticipation and Delay as Micro-Rhythm and Gesture in Hip Hop Aesthetics," *Journal of Music & Meaning* 8, no. 2 (2009): 1. All further references are included in the text.

⁶⁶ Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 2 (1995): 204.

metrical aspect on the one hand and the sounding and experienced aspect on the other.” (6) More so than prose fiction, the rhythm in rap music and metered poetry possesses a pattern of variation and repetition—“but it is also something performed and perceived.” Prose rhythms are also performed and perceived, albeit on the page. If we understand the *perception* of rhythm as integral to the word’s definition, the process of listening, in the case of music, or reading in the case of prose, adds new meaning. “In this way,” Pedersen continues, “rhythm seems to be created between an object and the act of sensing.” (6) Whether in music or literature, rhythm is greater than sheet music or scansion, in the same way that a wall calendar cannot communicate anything substantial about the years of our lives. Any definition of rhythm in literature must consider its expression (by the writer) and perception (by the reader) in a body of work. In *Meter as Rhythm*, Christopher Hasty alludes to this tension between definition and experience:

Among the attributes of rhythm we might include continuity of flow, articulation, regularity, proportion, repetition, pattern, alluring form or shape, expressive gesture, animation and motion... Indeed, so intimate is the connection of the rhythmical and the musical, we could perhaps most concisely define music as the rhythmization of sound (thus the “musicality” of speech or verse)... Music theory presents us with a reasonably clear understanding of rhythm. Thus restricted, rhythm is identified with metre, durational pattern, or durational proportion... But music as experienced is never an expression of numerical quantity.⁶⁷

Though he speaks here about rhythm and music, I find the same tensions arise in literature. In the last chapter, we discussed how the history of the word rhythm includes flow and form, and I tried to articulate how rhythm is an animating force for me as a fiction writer— a sort of creative “first mover”—at the same time that it emerges from the text. More plainly, rhythm in prose inhabits pattern and repetition. Like free verse and prose poetry, our sound units are syllables, words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs. In free verse, poets sustain a beat through image patterns and speech cadence. So too for prose; the words are simply arranged without line breaks. On a structural level, the pulse of punctuation and whitespace

⁶⁷ Christopher Hasty, *Meter as Rhythm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

animates a story like it animates verse. Simple sentences move faster. Our eyes skip from full stop to full stop. The pace may feel hurried. Choppy. Conversely, a long sentence, with modifying phrases added by commas, the predicate hovering near the full stop so we're not sure of the point until we reach the end of the line, may build anticipation by suspending the reader's attention, or indeed lose the reader's attention altogether and appear longwinded. When I tell colleagues I research rhythm in prose, they pause. I doubt they would hesitate if I said I studied rhythm in free verse. Neither form is organized by metre, yet rhythm in poetry is taken for granted— like rhythm in music or dance. For writers of prose fiction, rhythm feels like a term we have borrowed from other disciplines, one we must ask permission to use. Unlike poets or tap dancers, we presume ourselves unauthorized to spend time there. We are more comfortable with the word, "voice."

Pedersen writes that micro-rhythmic gestures relate a feeling of the music, which shifts by the "accentuation of the beat or a certain colour of a vowel." (8) So too with prose. Though short stories and novels are not typically performed aloud, the placement of participial phrases and punctuation, the framing of sentences into different patterns like anaphora or parallelism or anadiplosis, or simply ending a sentence on a hard syllable, tunes the sensation we experience when we read. Our understanding of the word "gesture" is also enhanced by the junction between musicology and literary studies. Robert S. Hatten defines gesture in music as an "energetic shaping through time,"⁶⁸ which echoes my experience of rhythm as the animating force that begins and emerges from my writing process. Wittgenstein writes that "verbal language contains a strong musical element. (A sigh, the modulation of tone or a question, for an announcement, for longing; all the countless *gestures* in the vocal cadences.)"⁶⁹ When we speak with one another, these gestures may be physical: where we place our hand, or how we shift the weight on our feet. But gestures may be implied even without a body: through language, as discussed above, or the strategic

⁶⁸ Robert S. Hatten, "A theory of musical gesture and its application to Beethoven and Schubert," *Music and Gesture*, edited by A. Gritten & E. King (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 8.

⁶⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* Vol. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 157.

absence of language, by way of whitespace and punctuation. Reading is a kinaesthetic experience: “words, and grammar, and syntax, and typographic phenomena such as typeface, margin, punctuation, activate cross-sensory, psycho-physiological responses prior to concept and interpretation.”⁷⁰ Clive Scott describes this kinesthetics of reading as “the dynamic of our organism as it is set in motion by the act of reading, and the sensations associated with that dynamic.” (214) He compares the translation the reading experience to humming a piano piece: “I am practising a kind of kinaesthetic empathy; my body weds and enacts the energies, the impulses, the hesitations let loose in the music, translates the music towards my own viscera.” (214) Viscera, again. The nerves, the glands, the muscles of the reader/translator, and, I would argue, the text.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s “A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease” assumes the form of a guide for the inherent silences and emphases of the narrator’s conversations with his parents and brother. The sentiment represented by Foer’s symbols is more urgent and vital than what could be relayed by an utterance of words. The symbols undercut, footnote and italicize what is spoken. For example, in the following passage, the silence mark, □, represents an absence of language, and ■, the “willed silence mark,” represents an intentional silence— often employed in response to questions the characters don’t want to answer. As seen here:

The “insistent question mark” denotes one family member’s refusal to yield to a willed silence, as in this conversation with my mother.

“Are you dating at all?”

“□”

“But you’re seeing people, I’m sure. Right?”

“□”

“I don’t get it. Are you ashamed of the girl? Are you ashamed of me?”

“■”

⁷⁰ Clive Scott, “The Translation of Reading,” *Translation Studies* vol. 4, no. 2 (2011), 213.

The story builds its own shorthand. The readers learn Foer’s symbols, and like acquiring a new language, we begin to listen for them and feel small bursts of gratification when we get them right. In Foer’s other work, like the novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, whitespace and typographical spacing convey as much emotion as the words themselves. As in “A Primer,” silence mingles with words to represent the unsaid communication between loved ones. The succession of words and punctuation builds anticipation for the beat, like a song you know, or a joke mounting to a punchline. Like a joke, this story is funny. It is also sad. Part of Foer’s facility with tragicomedy comes from his willingness to unhinge from regular language. Anyone who writes text messages with emoticons will understand the craft of writing without words. However, this story precedes the widespread use of “emoji” symbols by at least five years. In fact, one of his punctuation marks, the “corroboration mark,” is shaped like a smiley face:

It would be a mistake to think that it simply stands in place of ‘I agree,’ or even ‘Yes.’ Witness the subtle usage in this dialogue between my mother and father:

‘Could you add orange juice to the grocery list, but remember to get the kind with reduced acid. Also some cottage cheese. And that bacon substitute stuff. And a few Yahrzeit candles.’

‘☺’

‘The car needs gas. I need tampons.’

‘☺’

‘Is Jonathan dating anyone? I’m not prying, but I’m very interested.’

‘☺’ (83)

In the above exchange, Foer makes decisions with “real” punctuation to sharpen the mother’s tone and persona— for example, the comma-but construction in the first sentence followed by a series of

⁷¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, “A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease,” *The New Yorker*, June 10, 2002, 82. All further references are included in the text.

fragments, or the parallel construction of: “The car needs gas. I need tampons.” These are decisions any writer must make, but they work in support of his kookier “corroboration marks”— which do shift in meaning, however subtly. These nuances could be captured with a “multilingual” and “multi-sensory” appreciation of the story, rather than a purely linguistic one. Scott writes:

‘Multilingualism’ here refers not only to national languages, but to textual languages, the languages of textual presentation and projection: diacritical marks, punctuation, typefaces, layout, all forms of graphism (doodling, sketching, calligraphy, etc.) and all forms of voicing (speaking, murmuring, singing and, indeed, humming). (217)

I suggest we go one step further and understand these “forms of voicing” as rhythm.

Bridging

Why should we be picky about critical language? What does it matter if the metaphors we use to describe literature are dormant or vital or phonocentric or cardiovascular? I’ll tell you why it matters to me: as a creative and critical writer, the metaphors I choose in academic research will infuse my fiction. If I imagine the heft behind my narrator as “voice” in the tradition of industry professionals who shout superlatives from internet rooftops, or even in the tradition of writing guides and workshops, in which one word can and does implicate three or four functions at once, the quality of that narrator’s prose will echo those traditions— it may strive to be “spectacularly original” when such declarations from marketers are spectacularly divorced from the work itself, or at best it will be competent and functional. I do not mean to criticize work that aims to be competent and functional, nor the guides that help writers achieve that goal. However, where are the guts? Where are William Carlos Williams’ nerves and glands? Further, by pitching rhythm as a creative metaphor for “presence” in fiction, we rid ourselves of the phonocentric bias, which illuminates the utterance-less qualities of resonant literary style, such as whitespace, punctuation, and even non-linguistic symbols. Earlier in the essay, we dissected the concept of presence as

a theoretical term and landed on the idea that what we talk about when we talk about resonance (or the “heft” of living that marks a text) is something between presence and absence— a reaching for or becoming. This gap, or spacing, between presence and absence, interiority and exteriority echoes the other gaps we have discussed so far: between signifier and signified, the tenor and vehicle of a metaphor, and in the last essay, between the sounding and not-sounding of a beat, *rhuthmos*’ “falling drops” and “flow.” Derrida’s sense of spacing, or what is in-between, connects these supposed binaries so that we may “cross” over them as you would a bridge, like the “bridge” implied in the etymology of the word meta-phor itself.

We are limited in the extent we can be aware of our own rhythms as writers, and how rhythm affects us as readers— but we know it moves us. That is why we like nursery rhymes as children, even before we have developed our motor skills. Our sense of rhythm, and the way a beat moves us, sits at the heart of my research. As mentioned in the introduction, I attended a jazz dance workshop in Herräng, Sweden in 2012. By the end of the week, I realized each instructor had offered the same advice. They said to forget the movement. Before you consider the shape of a “Tacky Annie” or “Suzie Q,” internalize the beat. Skat the song to yourself. Embody it. Then see what shapes your limbs make. I wonder if the same applies to fiction writing— if we should forget character and plot until we find the “beat” of a line, or the story’s rhythm. Henri Lefebvre writes that, “Rhythms in all their multiplicity interpenetrate one another. In the body and around it... *rhythms are forever crossing and recrossing*, superimposing themselves upon each other...”⁷² His examples include breath, the heartbeat, thirst, hunger, the need for sleep, as well as sexuality, fertility and social life.

It is on the one hand a relationship of the human being with his own body, with his tongue and speech, with his gestures, in a certain place and with a gestural whole, and on the other hand, a

⁷² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 205. Emphasis added.

relationship with the largest public space, with the entire society and beyond it, the universe.⁷³

I write to find that junction of rhythm: the confluence of prose, poetry, music, dance, and the weight of our bodies in the world.

⁷³ Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier, “Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities,” *Writing on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 235.

III

Rhythm, *Durée* and the Grammatical Verbal

In the last chapter, I explored rhythm as a metaphor for presence in literary fiction. We questioned the privileging of certain hierarchies, like mind over body and speech over writing, two gestations of the presence / absence binary. Yet I maintained that fiction writers activate presence in their prose. That is: we imbue our prose with a sense of “vitality” by way of animated language and lively characters. To understand this potential contradiction, I drew upon a phrase from Adrienne Rich’s “Poetry III”—*heft of our living*. I noted that she did not write “heft of life” or “our lives,” but *living*. The gerund implies a process, a going on, while the noun “life” contains its sense in a confined time unit. I proposed the gerund “presenting” rather than presence to describe vital writing as a process more than a sealed, attainable *telos*. The gerund, part noun and part verb in its grammatical form, internalizes presence as practice, a work in progress, rather than an objective good or solid noun on which to hinge a hierarchy of expression. Gerunds, like present participles and infinitive verbs, are not confined by tense. The word “presenting” is not a closed substance, but a form, a becoming.

Henri Bergson focuses on this fluid or “becoming” nature of time. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics: the Creative Mind*, Bergson criticizes philosophers for seeking the reality of things above time, beyond what moves and changes, and consequently, outside what our senses and consciousness perceive...[Metaphysics] claimed to go beyond experience; what it did in reality was merely to take a full and mobile experience, lending itself to a probing ever-deepening and as a result pregnant with revelations—and to substitute for it a fixed extract, desiccated and empty, a system of abstract general ideas, drawn from that very experience or rather from its most superficial strata.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics: The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1975), 17. All further references are included in the text.

Interestingly, the original French title of this book is, *La pensée et le mouvant*. *Le mouvant* is a gerund in French, which translates to “the moving.” Thus the original title of Bergson’s book is not “Introduction to Metaphysics” or “the Creative Mind,” but literally “Thought and *the Moving*,” like our gerund “presenting” above. Recall the etymology of *rhuthmos* from our first chapter. Prior to Plato, the word denoted

form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid, the form of that which does not have organic consistency...thus *rhuthmos*, meaning literally ‘the particular manner of flowing,’ describes ‘dispositions’ or ‘configurations’ without fixity or natural necessity and arising from an arrangement that is always subject to change.” (Benveniste, 285-286)

Plato displaced this original sense of the word by focusing on “the form of movement which the human body makes in dancing...,” binding “a corporal *rhuthmos*” with *metron* and numbers. It is from this connotative shift that we began to perceive rhythm as meter, measure and ordered sequences.

My criticism of the Platonic conception of rhythm parallels Bergson’s criticism of understanding time by its measurement—the reduction of rhythm to measure or meter takes a “full and mobile experience” and replaces it with a “fixed extract, desiccated and empty.” Bergson compares this focus on time’s calculation to privileging the study of a cocoon over the study of its butterfly. He writes: “let us unfasten the cocoon, awaken the chrysalis; let us restore to movement its mobility, to change its fluidity, to time its duration.” (17) Metaphysics, or indeed prose writing, “will become experience itself; and duration,” or indeed rhythm, “will be revealed as it really is—unceasing creation, the uninterrupted upsurge of novelty.” (18)

In case it appears I am making too much of the descriptive and linguistic affinities between Bergson’s work and my own, I have found that by tracing his theories of duration to their logical conclusion, I have been able to better articulate my experience of rhythm as a fiction writer. Thus, this chapter will investigate Bergson’s concepts of *durée*, and to a lesser extent, *élan vital*, and propose a bridge between his theories of time and my own thoughts on rhythm as a writer-practitioner. From here, I

will explore one element of grammar through which writers' and readers' experiences of rhythm and time manifest themselves: the verbal. Virginia Woolf was a contemporary of Henri Bergson and has written extensively on rhythm herself—also from the point of view as a writer-practitioner. To demonstrate how verbals shape the rhythm of a sentence, or even an entire book, I will examine their effect on Woolf's novel, *The Waves*, which contains over two thousand examples.

Durée

Bergson's concept of *durée*, or duration, arises from the problem of how we conceive, experience and measure time. We measure time's passing through its extension in space, by way of clocks, sun dials, rings on a tree trunk. However, this measurement of time's passing omits our experience of it; "what is counted is only a certain number of extremities of intervals, or *moments*, in short, virtual halts in time." (12) Thus when we think of time, we imagine the measurement of duration, and not duration itself. (13) In a similar fashion, when asked to identify the rhythm of a song, a dancer will name the time signature.⁷⁵ A critic names the meter or form of the poem. That is: rather than experience the rhythm of the song or text, we frequently defer to how it is counted.⁷⁶ This is problematic for two reasons: first, it flattens our *experience* of rhythm and second, it follows that texts whose rhythms cannot be easily counted (such as prose texts) are arrhythmic. As Bergson continues: "this duration which science eliminates, and which is so difficult to conceive and express, is what one feels and lives." (13)

Bergson posits that language is partly responsible for our avoidance of lived duration, for as I indicate above, we express our experience of time's passing in a language of extension—"the terms which designate time are borrowed from the language of space." (14) If time, or rhythm, is a question of

⁷⁵ I speak here from my own experience as a dancer. There are schools of dance that explore more complicated theories of rhythm: Trinity Laban in London, for instance.

⁷⁶ I wish to acknowledge that there has been a turn in the last ten years toward a phenomenology of reading, which does account for the "experience" of poetry. See the works of Simon Jarvis and Clive Scott.

movement, the intelligence identifies the positions (point A to point B, for example, in the trajectory of a story or poem), but cannot conceive the transitions. (15) Bergson writes that fixity is “what our intelligence seeks; it asks itself where the mobile is to be found, where it will be, where it will *pass*. Even if it takes note of the moment of passing, even if it seems then to be concerned with duration, it restricts itself in that direction to verifying the simultaneity of two virtual halts... it is always with immobilities... that it seeks to deal.” (15) Bergson proposes we transcend the representation of movement, only ever a series of positions, and focus on movement itself. Suppose we do the same for rhythm. Reach beyond the signposts of meter, or in prose, rhetorical devices, toward the rhythmic experience. Once more, Bergson articulates the challenge:

How would it appear to a consciousness which desired only to see it without measuring it, which would then grasp it without stopping it, which in short, would take itself as object, and which, spectator and actor alike, at once spontaneous and reflective, would bring ever closer together—to the point where they would coincide—the attention which is fixed, and time which passes? (13)

The question of *how*—how to see rhythm without measuring, grasp rhythm without stopping it, how to be spectator and actor alike, at once spontaneous and reflective—underlies my entire thesis.

Bergson’s answer is intuition. Only intuition can grasp a succession that is not a juxtaposition, a growth from within, the “continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances.”⁷⁷ Intuition, for Bergson, is the direct view of the mind by the mind (not simply our own mind; the separation between our consciousnesses is less clear than the separation between our bodies.)⁷⁸ As Deleuze interprets: “intuition is not duration itself. Intuition is rather the movement by which we emerge from our own duration, by which we make use of our own duration to affirm and immediately to

⁷⁷ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution: An Alternate Explanation for Darwin’s Mechanism of Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1911), 4.

⁷⁸ Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 33.

recognize the existence of other durations, above or below us.”⁷⁹ Bergson pushes this idea one step further: if every living being is born, develops and dies, might we all intuit the vital? (33) We are, after all, subject to the same rhythms as plant life—see the sunflower, indeed any flower, and its dependence on the sun, the predictable turning of seasons. For Bergson, even the material universe connects to the mind by its duration—“either it endures, or it is bound up in our own duration...in either case it has to do with intuition through all the real change and movement that it contains...Intuition is what attains the spirit, duration, pure change.” (34)

Intuiting Rhythm

Suppose we access rhythm by a similar intuition—our consciousness linked to other consciousnesses, as two pedestrians fall in step on the pavement, or hearts beat together in a room. Ask a large group, perhaps students in a lecture hall, to find their pulse and tap it on their thigh. At first the taps will sound at random, but after a minute or two, the pulse, like footsteps on a street or bridge, will find the same beat. If you ask the students to remove their fingers from their wrist or their neck, the hands will continue to tap in time because the rhythm has inhabited the group—or the group has inhabited the rhythm. The metaphor operates in both directions. Of the iamb in poetry, Robert Hass writes: “it exists as a felt principle of order, beneath all possible embodiments, in the mind of the listener. It exists in silence, is invisible, unspeakable. An imagination of order. A music of spheres.”⁸⁰ What I wish to highlight here is that rhythm endures “besides and beyond the stopping and starting of audible sounds.”⁸¹ For example: in dance class. The final exercise in most contemporary or ballet dance classes is grand allegro—the big jumps across the

⁷⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 33. All further references are included in the text.

⁸⁰ Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1984), 67.

⁸¹ Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 118.

floor. Jumps, perhaps more than any other exercise, require the dancer to be “in tune” with the rhythm of the music or drumbeat, for they require the most energy and defiance of gravity. Unless the class is accompanied by a pianist or drummer, the music will play from the teacher’s iPod or CD, and inevitably, as this practice will repeat until the instructor directs the dancers to stop, the track will finish while they are still moving. Do the students freeze once the song ends, or fall out of time? No. They have inhabited the rhythm, or the rhythm has inhabited their bodies, and they continue to move as if the music is still playing—only the spectator will notice the beat has transferred from the music to the springing of their feet off the floor and the silences of airtime.

In her essay, “Street Music,” Virginia Woolf writes that we cannot silence music any more than we can stop our heart from beating—that music’s universality has “the strange and illimitable power of a natural force.”⁸² Even in the natural world, where rhythms are not as obvious as recorded music, “an attentive ear can detect something very like a vast pulsation, and if our ears were educated we might hear the music also which accompanies this.”⁸³ The same applies to my writing. It’s an embarrassing detail to admit, but once, at a public library in Toulouse, I caught myself rocking back and forth in my chair as I worked on my novel. I had never noticed this habit before, because I normally write from home without reason to be self-aware. However, I’ve since observed that a gentle rocking often accompanies my work process. It’s a habit I have not tried to curb, for it accompanies a deep “state of writing,” when I am immersed in the scene and the sentences—and I wonder if this movement sustains the prose rhythm as I transmit it to the page. As the plastic bag of water keeps the goldfish alive when you transfer her from the sea or pet store to a glass bowl, perhaps my body keeps the rhythm in motion as I transfer language in my head to the keyboard. In both cases, you lose something in the transference—the rudderlessness⁸⁴ of the

⁸² Virginia Woolf, “Street Music,” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 1: 1904-1912, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Harcourt, 1986), 30.

⁸³ Woolf, “Street Music,” 31.

⁸⁴ Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, 117.

sea, the mind—but in writing the rhythm, or placing the fish in a bowl, you make it graspable. You make readable the rhythm, an experience to return to and share with others. That is one way to consider rhythm in prose: the corporealization of head-music—the noticing and gathering of a beat, then giving it a body. And this body, the text, connects the body of the writer with the bodies of the readers, and for a moment—the duration of a line, or maybe an entire story—we fall in step.

On reading

Before I move on, I would like to take two detours: both outlined in Bergson's second introduction to *An Introduction to Metaphysics: The Creative Mind*. The first detour has to do with resemblance versus identity, which echoes our discussion of metaphor in the last chapter—specifically the notion of rhythm as a more vital metaphor than voice in discussions of style and “presence” in prose fiction. In a line of reasoning that leads to his theories on the one and the multiple, Bergson explains the traditional definitions of resemblance and identity, then complicates them. That is, rather than understand resemblance as a partial identity and identity as a complete resemblance, which follows very simply, Bergson proposes that “identity is something geometrical and resemblance something vital. The first to do with measure, the other belongs rather to the domain of art...” (58) In this way, a metaphor loses its creative impact when its overuse has ironed the comparison of two items into an identity, as I argued in the last chapter. The moment we forget the difference within a metaphor is the moment the word becomes two-dimensional, a triangle etched on a page rather than a pyramid. It feels worthwhile to reiterate the notion of *vitality* in language, language as a process, a body of words constantly evolving—which writers and speakers are active in using, and which we must question at times—rather than the sequence of words in a dictionary.

The second detour has to do with learning, and here is where Bergson's ideas can be applied most directly to our experience of rhythm as writers and readers. He comments that an education that relies too

heavily on books or encyclopedic retention suppresses the mind and creativity in the learner. He suggests, instead, we teach students the methods. (86) On the instruction of literature, Bergson acknowledges the use of lectures to elucidate the text and promote wider understanding, but he suggests students must first re-invent the work and appropriate the inspiration of the author⁸⁵:

To do so he must fall into step with him by adopting his gestures, his attitudes, his gait, by which I mean learning to read the text aloud with the proper intonation and inflection. The intelligence will later add shades of meaning...Before intellection properly so-called, there is the perception of structure and movement; there is, on the page one reads, punctuation and rhythm. Now it is in indicating this structure and rhythm, in taking into consideration the temporal relations between the various sentences of the paragraph and the various parts of each sentence, in following uninterruptedly the *crescendo* of thought and feeling to the point musically indicated as the culminating point that the art of diction consists. (86-87)

Bergson continues to suggest that this appropriation of the text—of the inspiration of the author, a phrase I will return to—should not be treated as an ornament at the end of one’s studies, but installed at the beginning, and continued throughout. He writes that, “one knows, one understands, only what one can in some measure reinvent” (87) and suggests a link between the art of reading, as he describes it, and his practice of intuition. Importantly, Bergson’s intuition should not be confused with a woolly sense of instinct or feeling, which the word typically connotes. Intuition is a labour, a “manner of thinking which courts difficulty.” (87) It seeks “to recapture, to get back the movement and rhythm of the composition, to live again creative evolution by being one with it in sympathy.” (87) Perhaps there is less distinction between the writer’s and reader’s experience of rhythm than I originally thought. If we read a text in the manner Bergson recommends—falling into step with the author, tracing its structure, the rhythm of its sentences and crescendo of thought—perhaps the readers and authors inhabit the same beat. They’re simply situated on opposite sides of the text. Bergson’s recommendation that we *appropriate the*

⁸⁵ Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 58.

inspiration of the author articulates all of these ideas. The verb inspire, from the Latin *inspirare*, to breathe or blow into. As writers, we must breathe or blow into the text, and the attentive, active reader will appropriate that breath, make that breath their own. The word “inspire” itself links rhythm, life and creation at the same time.

Verbals and Time

In the introduction to this chapter, I proposed the “verbal” as a part of speech through which rhythm manifests itself to the reader and writer alike. As for many philosophers, Bergson’s language on time employs verbals to articulate its passing—an otherwise difficult experience to convey. Before we launch into a direct discussion of the verbal, I will linger with Bergson to approach the grammatical form from a sideways angle, a further discussion on duration and our perception of change, which will elucidate more richly the verbal’s power in the sentence. It is important to note that for Bergson, multiplicity and unity are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they meet, and only in their meeting do we find true duration. (149) I challenged a similar dualism in the first chapter, when I proposed that rhythm could be conceived as both “flow,” or *rheos* and “falling drops,” *cadentibus guttis*. Bergson likens this “indefinable combination” of the multiple and the one to a necklace—one thread holding together a collection of beads. (185) He writes:

there is neither a rigid, immovable substratum nor distinct states passing over it like actors on a stage. There is simply the continuous melody of our inner life—a melody which is going on and will go on, indivisible, from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence... This indivisible continuity of change is precisely what constitutes true duration. (149)

Though time implies succession, he denies that succession is presented to our consciousness with a before and after, in the same way you cannot sever music into distinct notes as you listen—at least not without losing the tune. (149) Only in space do we distinguish between parts so clearly, and “it is in

spatialized time that we ordinarily place ourselves. We have no interest in listening to the uninterrupted humming of life's depths. And yet, that is where real duration is...Reality is mobility itself." (149-150) If change constitutes reality, then it follows for Bergson that we conceive the past differently. We tend to privilege the present in our thinking—if any of the past perseveres, it is through “an act of charity on the part of the present,” known as memory. (150) When we think of the present, we imagine an interval of duration. It is slippery to pinpoint:

my present, at this moment, is the sentence I am pronouncing. But it is so because I want to limit the field of my attention to my sentence. This attention is something that can be made longer or shorter, like the interval between the two points of a compass. For the moment, the points are just far enough apart to reach from the beginning to the end of my sentence; but if the fancy took me to spread them further my present would embrace, in addition to my last sentence, the one that preceded it: all I should have had to do is adopt another punctuation. (151)

Note the present participle in the first sentence: “my present, at this moment, is the sentence *I am pronouncing*.”⁸⁶ Like Bergson's notion of duration itself, the present participle, half verb, half adjective in its construction, sits outside a typical tense conjugation and implies a continued duration, with the past, present and future rolled into the same utterance; “our present falls back into the past when we cease to attribute to it an immediate interest.” An attention to life thus includes the past history of a conscious person in an undivided present:

Not as instantaneity, not like a cluster of simultaneous parts, but as something continually present which would also be something continually moving: such, I repeat, is the melody, which one perceives as indivisible, and which constitutes from one end to the other...a perpetual present.” (152)

⁸⁶ The original French reads: “Mon présent, en ce moment, est la phrase que je suis occupé à prononcer.” http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bergson_henri/pensee_mouvant/bergson_pensee_mouvant.pdf

In the same way the Platonic definition of *rhuthmos* confines our understanding of rhythm to measure, “it is a certain regulating of mobility on mobility which produces the effect of immobility.” (156) Bergson suggests that something like a fourth dimension opens through philosophical thought—a dimension that binds the present with anterior perceptions and at the same time outlines the future (157):

Reality no longer appears then in the static state, in its manner of being; it affirms itself dynamically, in the continuity and variability of its tendency. What was immobile and frozen in our perception is warmed and set in motion. Everything comes to life around us, everything is revived in us. A great impulse carries beings and things along. We feel ourselves uplifted, carried away, borne along by it. We are more fully alive... (157)

Again, you could use the same words to describe rhythm in prose. Prose that has been written without an ear or sensitivity to rhythm remains “immobile and frozen” on the page. Words written with a thumb on that *uninterrupted humming* Bergson mentions, or Woolf’s “vast pulsation,” are warmed and set in motion. Rhythm brings prose to life—literally sets writing in motion, carries the words along. This is exactly the sensation many poets and prose writers describe—rhythm as a first mover, or to borrow another Bergsonian term, albeit out of context, *élan vital*.

Often translated to “vital impetus” or “vital force,” *élan vital* is an idea Bergson develops in *Creative Evolution*. Bergson’s sense of the phrase, and its significance in his criticism of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, is less relevant here, but the phrase’s direct translation pertains to my conceptualization of rhythm. In the translators’ introduction to *Bergsonism*, Tomlinson and Habberjam explain that the French word *élan* contains a broader range of meaning than the English “impetus”—from momentum to surge to vigour.⁸⁷ All of these words—impetus, force, momentum, surge, vigour—echo the language writers use to describe rhythm, as well as words I use to articulate my own experiences. The idea I would like to draw attention to is this notion of the past, present, and future folded into one grammatical form, which is not “immobile” or “frozen” on the page, but dynamic, warm, in motion.

⁸⁷ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 9. All further references are included in the text.

The Verbal

In case an understanding of verbals has not been clarified by the above discussion, I will elaborate now on their use in grammar. Verbals are verb forms, words constructed from verbs that act as another part of speech in a sentence. One might consider verbals the ninth part of speech, after nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and interjections, as they do not function as verbs in the sentence, but as nouns, adjectives or adverbs. Verbals can take one of three shapes: participial, gerund or infinitive. A participial phrase uses the present or past participle of a verb and modifies nouns in a sentence, thus functioning as an adjective. For example, “**whistling** the tune to the Magic Roundabout, the boy played with his yo-yo,” in which the verb “to whistle” becomes the present participle “whistling” to describe the subject of the sentence, the boy. Verbals may also take the past participle form: “the yo-yo, too tightly **wound** by the boy’s sister, snapped off the string and rolled down the road into the gutter.” Unlike the word “snapped” in this sentence, the past participle “wound” does not function solely as a verb, but rather an adjective modifying the yo-yo. Gerunds also end in -ing, but they act as nouns in the sentence rather than adjectives. For instance: “the **snapping** of the yo-yo confirmed to the boy this would be a terrible day,” in which the word “snapping” forms part of the nominal phrase that provides the subject of the verb “confirmed.” The gerund could form the object of the sentence too, as in the following example: “Later, the sister denied **laying** so much as a finger on the boy’s yo-yo,” in which the verbal “laying” is the object of the verb “denied.” The third verbal type is the infinitive phrase, which typically functions as a noun in a sentence, though it can also operate as an adjective or adverb. “For the boy, **to lie** about touching the yo-yo was even worse than winding the string too tightly;” “his sister’s willingness **to deceive** confirmed to the boy her deficient moral fibre;” “he would record further deficiencies in his journal **to prove**, once and for all, her duplicity and malice.” In these examples, “to lie” operates as a noun, and the subject of “was;” “to deceive” modifies the noun “willingness” and acts as an adjective, and

“to prove” modifies the verb “record,” functioning as an adverb. As nouns and modifiers, verbals remain un-conjugated and depend on the main verb of the sentence to indicate tense. That temporal ambiguity produces a suspended effect in the sentence, lifting the sentence from distinctions of past, present and future, managing to include traces of all three at once—the past gnawing into a present that is already swelling into the future. Deleuze employs these grammatical nuances to outline his distinction between duration and matter, explaining that “duration is like a naturing nature (*nature naturante*) and matter a natured nature (*nature naturée.*)” (93) In this case, “naturing,” which operates as a present participle modifying the noun “nature,” suggests the same process of becoming that we discussed with “presenting” above, and rhythm.

My interest in verbals is twofold: first, their grammar reflects the fluidity of duration and rhythm. Verbs conjugated in the simple present or past tenses represent time and rhythm as confined, calculable entities, measures more “fixed” and “desiccated.” Second, in addition to functioning as a sort of grammatical metaphor, verbals demonstrate a writer’s rhythm in prose that is detectable by the reader. That is: rhythmic prose can be, and often is, written with regularly conjugated verbs, and the mere insertion of verbals into dead prose does not make it rhythmic. However, the “flow” of a sentence or chain of sentences linked with gerunds or participles often reflects the “groove” the writer has found in writing. More to the point—the accumulation of gerunds and participles in a paragraph provides a useful effect the reader can identify when considering a prose text’s rhythmic material, which is otherwise difficult to pin down. To be very clear, I am in no way arguing the verbal is a “pinnacle” of rhythm in prose, or a feature writers should incorporate into their own styles. Indeed, overuse of present participles can invite grammatical contortions like dangling modifiers and betray amateurish prose. Rather: mindfully-chosen verbals are one manifestation of rhythm that is of interest because they function as grammatical metaphors for rhythm itself. Now, we will turn to an example of verbals in literature to more fully understand how they alter and construct rhythm in prose.

Verbals in *The Waves*

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* offers more than two thousand examples of -ing endings.⁸⁸ Whether gerunds or participial phrases, the verbals cultivate an ongoing, unconsummated present, an expectation of more to be added before we inhale:

What malevolent yet searching light would Louis throw upon this dwindling autumn evening, upon this china-smashing and trolling of hunting-songs...But I seeking contrasts often feel his eye on us, his laughing eye, his wild eye, adding us up like insignificant items in some grand total which he is ever pursuing in his office. And one day, taking a fine pen and dipping it in red ink, the addition will be complete; our total will be known; but it will not be enough.⁸⁹

The accumulation of verbals—adjectival like “searching light,” “dwindling autumn evening,” “I seeking,” “he is ever pursuing,” or nominal like “china-smashing,” “trolling of hunting songs” delays the gratification of the paragraph. It may be helpful to distinguish now between “loose” and “periodic” sentences. In the former, the main point comes early, though it could be modified by subsequent phrases and subordinate clauses. In the latter, the reverse is true: the sentence begins with a series of modifying phrases, which finally culminate in the main thought or independent clause. The sentence, “But I seeking contrasts...” is a loose sentence: it begins with the main point, “I feel his eye on us,” which is modified by subsequent adjectives describing Louis’ eye, his watchfulness. By contrast, the next sentence saves its meaning for the end: “And one day, taking a fine pen and dipping it in red ink, the addition will be complete.” Such sentences create an internal drama within the grammar itself—stalling the consummation of the paragraph and cultivating suspense in multiple understandings of the word: suspense as in mystery,

⁸⁸ Irma Rantavaara, “‘Ing’-Forms in the Service of Rhythm and Style in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 61, no. 1 (1960): 80-81.

⁸⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2000), 50. All further references are included in the text.

suspension as delay, suspension as floating. In the above passage, the “consummation” of the sentences does not even take the form of a present or past tense verb, but the future tense—“the addition will be complete; our total will be known...” which contributes a further feeling of delay, a hint the text is still building, accumulating, becoming. As *The Waves* is a novel with over two thousand -ing endings, the last sentence in my excerpt will be replaced by further suspended sentences, such as “people go on passing,” (51) which is repeated five times on the next page. Eventually, Louis describes the patrons in the eating-shop:

supple-faced, with rippling skins, that are always twitching with the multiplicity of their sensations, prehensile like monkeys, greased to this particular moment, they are discussing with all the right gestures the sale of a piano... (51)

The entire novel is a tension-building, the string of a bow pulling back. Interestingly, Rantavaara excludes past participles from her discussion and does not acknowledge the present participles or gerunds as verb forms distinct from verbs. I feel this is an unfortunate omission. Though past participles may be confused with simple past tense conjugations, they operate as adjectives and cultivate the same sense of anticipation and suspended time as present participles. In the above example, “greased to this particular moment” could be slotted into a past or present tense narration, and though attributed to one moment, one halt in time, it does not prevent or stall that moment’s passing—it merely acts as an adjective, like “supple-faced” or “prehensile,” before ebbing into the next wave of description.

Woolf’s preoccupation with rhythm has been documented in her essays and letters, and this preoccupation often bleeds into the content of her novels, as well as the form. In the same two pages we have been discussing above, Louis says:

Yet I feel, too, the rhythm of the eating house. It is like a waltz tune, eddying in and out, round and round. The waitresses, balancing trays, swing in and out, round and round, dealing plates of greens, of apricots and custard, dealing them at the right time, to the right customers. The average men, including her rhythm in their rhythm... take their greens, take their apricots and custard.

Where then is the break in this continuity? What the fissure through which one sees disaster? The circle is unbroken; the harmony complete. Here is the central rhythm; here the common mainspring. I watch it expand, contract; then expand again. Yet I am not included. (51-52)

It has often been suggested that Woolf read Henri Bergson⁹⁰, as did many writers and thinkers at the time, and the above passage appears to be describing that continuous duration, an unbroken circle or harmony. This excerpt borrows, whether knowingly or not, two central Bergsonian motifs: *détente* and contraction. As Tomlinson and Habberjam write in the “Translators’ Note” to *Bergsonism*, the word *détente* signals not only relaxation, literally a de-tension, as often appears in English translations, but a more active sense of the word: “meaning ‘spring’ or ‘expansion.’” (10) Tomlinson and Habberjam explain that the latter meaning is often used in thermodynamics to describe the expansion of a gas that has been pressurized, and because of this double meaning in French, they have elected to translate *détente* as “relaxation” or “expansion” depending on context. (10) Interestingly, Woolf uses the words “expand and contract,” and even likens this effect to a *mainspring*, the precise metaphor often missed in translation. Indeed, contraction and release is another way to conceive rhythm; in *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne Langer argues that “the essence of rhythm is the preparation of a new event by the ending of a previous one... Rhythm is the setting up of new tensions by the resolution of former ones.”⁹¹ Langer goes on to describe rhythm as a “relation between tensions,” (129) writing that:

everything that prepares a future creates rhythm; everything that begets or intensifies expectation, including the expectation of sheer continuity, prepares the future (regular “beats” are an obvious and important source of rhythmic organization); and everything that fulfills the promised future, in ways foreseen or unforeseen, articulates the symbol of feeling. Whatever the special mood of

⁹⁰ Rantavaara, “‘Ing’-Forms,” 87.

⁹¹ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed From Philosophy in a New Key* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 126-127. All further references are included in the text.

the piece, or its emotional import, the vital rhythm of subjective time (the “lived time” that Bergson adjures us to find in pure experience) permeates the complex, many-dimensional, musical symbol as its internal logic, which relates music intimately and self-evidently to life.

(129)

Langer refers specifically to music and musical symbols as representations of rhythm, though the same words could apply to rhythm in prose, and particularly verbals, which “prepare a future” at the end of the sentence or passage and “intensify expectation.”

Though Louis observes the force of rhythm in the eating shop, he feels excluded from it as an outsider, an Australian whose accent will be noticed the moment he opens his mouth to speak. He desires to be protected by the “waves of the ordinary” as the other patrons, but he feels outside this particular rhythm, perhaps the rhythm of all locals. Like the reader, Louis observes the cafe rhythm rather than participates, but this vantage point allows him to witness the rhythm more acutely, to comment on it. He also exists within a broader rhythm, which he shares with the other five narrators: the grammatical and syntactical consistencies that link their speech.⁹² Kirsty Martin discusses *The Waves* in *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence*. She argues that “being linked by rhythm suggests... a form of sympathetic attunement: [the characters in *The Waves*] are linked together at a primal, bodily level.” (114) Martin observes that Woolf’s experimentation with grammatical unity pushes beyond the dominant trend at the time of writing stream-of-consciousness. She contrasts *The Waves* with *Ulysses*, where each character is marked by a different speech pattern. Critics complained that the similarity between the voices made them difficult to distinguish, and that Woolf did not appear “concerned with people,” (115) yet the opposite could be argued. Woolf portrays “individuality as ineluctable energy, an energy structured and paralleled by the energies of the world.” (115) It is worth noting that the novel was written “in the evening when the gramophone [was] playing late Beethoven

⁹² Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy*, 114. All further references are included in the text.

sonatas,”⁹³ and the sonatas influenced the novel’s composition. (Martin, 119) The succession of character narrations follows a fugue pattern, in which one voice states a melody or phrase before other voices enter in counterpoint. (119) In music, rhythmically independent voices may sound at the same time to form an interdependent harmony. In prose, where sentences must be written and read sequentially, Woolf links the voices through grammatical patterns like the verbal to mimic a contrapuntal multiplicity of sounds.

To the extent that authors seek to engage their readers, they do so remotely. As a writer, I feel invested in this “linking” quality of rhythm—in its potential to provide a bridge, or sympathetic attunement between characters in a novel, or the novel and its readers. But rhythm’s capacity for inclusion carries also a capacity for exclusion—as observed by Louis in the eating-shop. Some readers feel alienated by a text others feel compelled by, perhaps because of taste, perhaps because the text challenges narrative conventions of a clear story that is so “natural” or “real” you forget its artifice. As an author, I have been asked where my fidelity lies in writing—to language, or to my characters and what happens to them. Historically, I have always answered the former. However, as I turn to longer projects, I have found it necessary to balance the two allegiances, if I may call them that. It helps to return to this notion of corporealization—of writing as listening or feeling, and giving form to what you “sense” (my use of sensory words are figurative here—for me, rhythm is an internal component of the writing process itself.) The text provides the body—a surrogate linking of hands between author and reader. Deleuze speaks of creative emotion, which is produced by an interval between society and our individual intelligences:

And what is this creative emotion, if not precisely a cosmic memory that actualizes all the levels at the same time, that liberates man from the plane (*plan*) or the level that is proper to him, in order to make him a creator, adequate to the whole movement of creation? (111)

⁹³ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* Vol. III, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1977–84), 139.

Writers and readers are both responsible for activating this “cosmic memory.” The moment where writers and readers fall into step, where they share, for the duration of a line or story, the same beat, provides not simply aesthetic pleasure, but a pause or breath in the wider passage of creation.

Conclusion

Metaphors have proven central to my exploration of rhythm. They provide an entry point to understanding rhythm as a concept, which can be slippery to articulate. We experience rhythm all around us, indeed inside of us, yet it is difficult to describe what these experiences call back to. A motif that recurs in this thesis reflects the task of “carrying across” implicit in the word metaphor itself: the motif of bridges. The word motif, from the latin *movere*, to move, also echoes the mobility of *rhuthmos*. Rhythm moves us—physically and figuratively.

Motion is also inscribed in the rhythms of *Demi-Gods*, the creative portion of this thesis. The emotion of the characters, which I have tried to communicate through sonic rhythms at the level of the sentence, but also structurally: by where I end a scene or chapter. The two main characters, Willa and Patrick, only see each other a handful of times. The years in-between are the “grey gaps between black beats,” as Nabokov articulated: the tender intervals. *Demi-Gods* “moves along” by the elision and collision of episodes—marked as much by what is on the page as by what I have omitted. Before I elaborate on these ideas, to provide a bridge to the novel itself, it will be useful to retrace the conceptual steps I have taken in the thesis so far.

As I began above, the motif of bridges has proven central to my conceptualization of rhythm. The entire project engages in a labour of bridging. In the first chapter, I attempted to bridge two supposedly incompatible analogies: rhythm as *rheos* and rhythm as *cadentibus guttis*. I investigated the “flowing” quality of *rhuthmos* through a discussion of Meschonnic’s theories in *Critique du Rythme*. For Meschonnic, rhythm is language in motion—always unique and inseparable from meaning in the moment of enunciation. Rhythm is the process of subjectivation—the *artwork*, the text as an activity rather than a product. By contrast, most today understand rhythm as distinct from what the words represent—that is, from the text’s meaning and thematic content. Nietzsche represents this distinction by invoking the gods Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo rules appearances and the plastic arts—how art appears; Dionysus rules the

headier realm of music and intoxication. Though Apollo helps us make sense of the world, and our individual subjectivity, Dionysus tempts us to lose ourselves—to become apart of something larger. Therefore rhythm, for Nietzsche, provides a break, or falling drop, from our Apollonian subjectivity. In the same chapter, I turned to the etymology of *rhuthmos* to provide a chronological bridge to the word's usage before Plato. I acknowledged the distinction between *rhuthmos* and another ancient Greek word for form: *skhēma* (σχῆμα), which refers to a fixed shape. By contrast, *rhuthmos* describes the form “in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid.”⁹⁴ The word itself implies a hybrid between noun and action, form and flow. Thus I suggested the two metaphors for understanding rhythm—rhythm as flowing stream vs. rhythm as falling drops—were not mutually exclusive.

In Chapter 2, I highlighted the bridge inherent in the word metaphor itself. I discussed the need for a gap between the mimed and mime, or tenor and vehicle, for the imitation or metaphor to be effective. I found that our overuse of the term “voice” had flattened this gap, and I proposed a new, creative metaphor in discussions of prose style: presence as rhythm. Historically, philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau and Hegel have interpreted graphic signifiers, i.e. written words, as a transcription of phonic signifiers, spoken words. These thinkers presumed written words, as signs of signs, to be derivative, and thus subordinate to speech. Saussure inherited these assumptions and asserted that the sole purpose of writing was to represent speech. Spoken word, nearer to the realm of ideas, acquires the status of the soul, whereas writing, “the letter, the sensible inscription, has been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit...”⁹⁵ Writing thus inverts the “natural” relationship between the soul, mind and body. Derrida punctured these assumptions by questioning the distinction between signified and signifier. He suggested that “every signifier functions by referring to other signifiers, without one ever arriving at a signified.”⁹⁶ The identity of the sign is ensured only by its difference from and

⁹⁴ Benveniste, “The Notion of Rhythm,” 285-286.

⁹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 35.

⁹⁶ Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, 33.

deferral to other signs and concepts. The “matter or stuff from which it seemed that signifiers were cut out, as it were, disappears from the essential definition of the sign,” which undermines the tendency of linguistics to privilege voice over writing. (Bennington, 33) Nonetheless, I maintained that I strive for something like “presence” when I write fiction. That is: I aim to produce “vital” writing by way of “animated” language and “lively” characters. To bridge this apparent inconsistency, I argued that “vital writing” describes a process rather than an end point. I offered the gerund “presenting” as a way to articulate presence as practice, or a work in progress, rather than an objective good on which to hinge a hierarchy of expression. The gerund “presenting” does not pitch presence above absence, but still articulates the value of vital characters and language in prose fiction.

I discuss verbals throughout the thesis, but they became a focus of Chapter 3 in my exploration of Bergson’s duration. Bergson accuses his contemporaries of replacing a full and mobile experience of time’s passing with a “fixed extract, dessicated and empty.”⁹⁷ Bergson urges us to restore to change its fluidity, to time its duration—to reveal duration for what it is: “unceasing creation, the uninterrupted upsurge of novelty.” (18) We measure time’s passing by counting the “extremities of intervals,” or “short, virtual halts.” (12) In a similar fashion, when asked to identify the rhythm of a song, the dancer will clap the time signature; a critic often names the meter or form of the poem. Rather than experience the rhythm of the song or text, we defer to how it is counted. I found this default problematic because it flattens our experience of rhythm and suggests that texts whose rhythms cannot be easily measured, such as prose texts, are arrhythmic. Bergson asks how it might feel to experience time without measuring, to “grasp” time without stopping it, to be both “spectator and actor alike, at once spontaneous and reflective.” (13) This question echoes my challenge as I try to theorize rhythm as a creative writer—spectator and actor at the same time. Bergson writes: “my present, at this moment, is the sentence I am pronouncing.” (151) I noted the present participle he uses: “the sentence I *am pronouncing*.” Like Bergson’s notion of duration itself, the present participle, half verb, half adjective in its construction, sits outside a typical tense

⁹⁷ Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 17.

conjugation and implies a continued duration. With imprints of past, present and future inscribed in one utterance, the verbal becomes its own grammatical bridge of written time. Verbals can also be a manifestation of stylistic rhythm in prose, as demonstrated by Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

Another bridge at the core of my thesis is the one Pascal Michon calls the trans-subject: the signifying rhythmic system that constitutes the artwork, which links, disrupts and empowers readers and writers across the text.⁹⁸ Recall Diderot's hieroglyph, the "very image of the soul rendered by vocal inflection."⁹⁹ The hieroglyph of a text and the artist's *manière*, or style, are forms of individuation (and distancing) at the same time they are forms of subjectivation (and linking), for though they allow an individual to become an agent, they also have a capacity for action. The process of subjectivation, rhythm as activity, as *energeia*, is "indefinitely re-actualized in the future by countless readers, viewers, listeners, bringing to each one of them an upheaval in his or her life, a power to go ahead..."¹⁰⁰ In this way, we can think of the text itself as the bridge that links the author with the reader, a vessel that allows them both to inhabit, and be inhabited by, one rhythm.

In the introduction, I asked whether rhythm *preceded* or *emerged from* the text. Is rhythm the very instant of enunciation, as it is for Meschonnic, or does rhythm come before enunciation, as Heidegger's animating wave, which signals back to its "ever more hidden source."¹⁰¹ What *is* that source? And what is the force that conceals it? Heidegger writes: "The site of the poem, as the source of the animating wave, holds within it the veiled essence of what, to metaphysical representation, can at best appear as rhythm."¹⁰² Is the site of the poem, or any text, not the writer's mind at the moment that immediately

⁹⁸ Pascal Michon, "Rhythm as Rhuthmos...Part 2," *Rhuthmos*, 2016.

⁹⁹ Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, trans. John Goodman (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 231.

¹⁰⁰ Michon, "Rhythm as Rhuthmos...Part 2," 2016.

¹⁰¹ Martin Heidegger, "Language in the Poem: A Discussion on Georg Trakl's Poetic Work," *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc, 1971), 160.

¹⁰² Heidegger, "Language in the Poem," 160.

precedes enunciation? Even if that mind is drawing from Meschonnic's "social cistern of language," or Derrida's *archewriting*, the instant of pre-enunciation occurs internally in the mind of a writer or speaker. I articulate thoughts and rhythms in my mind before I "voice" or "embody" them in speech or writing—this labour appears most obviously in silent reading, but also in the work of thinking and composition. At the risk of frustrating Heidegger and Meschonnic scholars alike, I'll suggest a final bridge. Perhaps the site of the text is the instant of pre-enunciation, siphoned from a reservoir of shared language, mobilized contemporaneously with, indeed dependent upon, the continued act of enunciation, the *energeia* of writing, the *artwork*, so the instigating rhythm presses from the mind of the writer at the same time it signals back to the source of the text. Rhythm would thus initiate and accumulate at the same time—emerging from the process of enunciation, of subjectivation, at the same time it precedes it. The two sides of the binary—rhythm as an initiating force on the one hand, versus rhythm as an emergent force on the other—would thus be co-activating, co-creating.

Recall our first example—rhythm as it manifested itself, and indeed disrupted, the opening of Millennium Bridge. Because the engineers had accounted for the crowd's vertical, not lateral, vibrations, the pedestrians' tendency to fall in step with their neighbours caused the bridge to sway. The crowd adjusted their steps to the bridge's motion so they could balance better. As the pedestrians synchronized their gaits to each other's, and to the bridge's, vibration, the bridge's vibration increased. What I wish to underscore now are the two planes of rhythm: the crowd's vertical vs. lateral vibrations. Perhaps we could consider text rhythm in terms of these axes—the physical manifestation of rhythm (rhythm as it *emerges* in the material of the sentence) along the horizontal *x* axis, intersected by the less tangible concept of rhythm, of *rhuthmos*, the instigator and trans-subject, along the *y* axis. As we require both planes of a graph to make sense of space, and the engineers' oversight on Millennium Bridge, perhaps we require both planes of rhythm to make sense of the concept—the *x* and *y* axes of rhythm, rhythm as a self-initiating and emergent vital impetus. Perhaps the rhythm that drives our writing or reading contains the imprints of both these planes.

Demi-Gods

At the outset of this project, I feared that scrutinizing my writing while still embroiled in that process would stymie or halt its development. When I write, I withdraw into a mental “plane” separate from my conscious life—a sort of dream state, which is at odds with simultaneous interrogation of what that entails. However, rhythm is integral to entering this state—the rhythm of the words I wrote the day before, which I read over to settle back into their cadence; the rhythm of the music I listen to, always, while working; the rhythm of my own body. Now that I have completed my novel, I feel freer to reflect on these aspects.

I’ll begin by echoing Virginia Woolf and Diderot: it’s all rhythm. *Le rythme est tout*. It feels strange to dismantle the novel and point to its rhythmic material because rhythm was embedded in its conception. When I think of rhythm as an incipient and emergent force, I think back to the first lines I wrote, which remain in my memory, though I wrote them three and a half years ago:

Last July—the San Diego Zoo.

Joan in tapered slacks, Mom’s eggshell blouse with the scalloped collar. Her cheeks have turned already. As leaves turn. The sun collects on her shoulders—a dust down her back, which pinches each shell of her spine. Now I recognize this summer as the fulcrum. One one side, Joan and I bathe together, dip in the cold lagoon, spread our bodies over the grass like tablecloths. On the other, Joan stands in our mother’s clothes. Her hand pushes the curl that kept falling back into the crown of her hat. She ignores me when I say her hat looks like a salad bowl. A flying saucer. When I hum the theremin from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the setting originated from Super 8 footage my Grandfather took in San Diego in the 1950s. But the rhythm of this first passage I wrote, which sets the mood for the entire

novel, including the scenes that now precede it, emerged from these kernels: “Last July—the San Diego Zoo. Joan in tapered slacks, Mom’s eggshell blouse with the scalloped collar.” You can tell I’m focusing on rhythm when I omit verbs. I could have said, “Last July, while we were at the San Diego Zoo...,” but I elide “while we were at” with an m-dash. Equally, I could have said, “Joan wore tapered slacks...,” but I replace the verb with the preposition “in” instead. When I focus on rhythm, my vocabulary reduces to the nuts of speech—namely the nouns, which are often the first words we learn in a language. Rhythm feels, for me, like a contraction. The contraction before Bergsonian *détente*, perhaps. Even if that contraction is ultimately a “siphoning” from the social cistern of language.

As I continued that first passage, I linguistically set up the fulcrum implied by the words. The “on one side” construction is followed by the asyndetic construction, “Joan and I bathe together, dip in the cold lagoon, spread our bodies over the grass like tablecloths.” This shape is mirrored by what follows “on the other”: another string of simple sentences, this time linked by full stops rather than commas (but still no conjunctions.) None of this was premeditated, but it emerged from the rhythm, which itself stirred from a mental contraction, or siphoning, that released its own emergence. Indeed, “siphon” is a morphologically satisfying metaphor here. A siphon is a “a tube used to *convey* liquid upwards from a *reservoir* and then down to a *lower level* of its own accord. Once the liquid has been forced into the tube, typically by suction or immersion, *flow continues* unaided.”¹⁰³ Similarly, rhythm conveys language from the social cistern of language, then down into a “lower level” of consciousness, the writer’s mind—a process that feels, to the writer, like an invisible force—a suction, perhaps—until we relax into the “flow.”

Above, I described the presiding rhythm of *Demi-Gods* as one marked by the gaps between sections—the years between 1953 and 1957, for instance, or between 1959 and 1961. It is notable here that two words I invoked—collision and elision—derive from the same root, the Latin, *laedere*, to strike. Now here is a verb that contains many traces: lightning strikes, a fist strikes, but so does an inspired

¹⁰³ *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “siphon,” accessed May 23 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/siphon>. Emphasis added.

thought, a clock, a musical note; a match strikes; workers strike; one strikes a deal, gold, a pose. *Collidere* means, of course, to strike together, to collide. *Elidere* suggests the action meets some resistance: “to crush out.” This nuance comes from the Greek words for losing a sound in a word, *ekthlipsis*, and *ekthlibein*, to squeeze out: from *ex*, out of and *thlibein*, to squeeze. *Ekthlibein*, to squeeze out, echoes my experience of writing as a contraction or siphoning of language. Interestingly, *thlibein* connects also to *thlan*, bruise.¹⁰⁴ The years I elided in *Demi-Gods* are not blank. They leave bruises.

Rhythm has shaped the form of the novel—that is, the novel’s *formation* as I “squeezed” the story into written words. However, I have also found that my study of rhythm has influenced the novel’s themes in ways I didn’t anticipate. You will notice that the passage, “Last July—the San Diego Zoo...,” no longer exists, as such, and the passage that evolved from this one now takes place in Chapter 2. To exemplify how my research has fed into themes I explore in the novel, I will excerpt a section from the revised opening:

I have been thinking about memory as a space we dwell in. A dwelling. On the one hand, the word denotes a residence, the place we return to—a house, a warm doorway, a nest. On the other, dwelling indicates a process of reflection. A lingering.

*Maybe both involve lingering.*¹⁰⁵

The narrator, Willa, possesses a sensitivity for language that mirrors my interest in etymology, which was fostered by this project. Later in the book, she articulates the etymology of “spinster” from “*spinnen*, to spin, a spinner of thread.” (276) She identifies the “sun” inherent in the word “solipsistic,” (251-252) and eventually studies Latin, one of the linguistic foundations for the English language. This preoccupation

¹⁰⁴ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. *ecthlipsis*, accessed May 23, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecthlipsis>.

¹⁰⁵ Eliza Robertson, *Demi-Gods*, page 87 of this thesis. All further references are included in the text.

with words, which is inherited from my own preoccupation, is evidenced on the first page, as excerpted above. In common parlance, we use the word “dwelling” interchangeably with “home,” “house,” or “residence.” That is—we’ve come to understand the word as a simple noun. Grammatically, however, the word is a gerund: half noun and half the verb, “to dwell.” Willa understands this nuance and comments that it indicates a “*process* of reflection,” a “lingering,” which echoes my discussion of rhythm and verbals.

Other theoretical concepts emerged in the novel too: such as the Derridean notions of presence, absence and trace. In one of the culminating scenes, Willa applies clothespins to Patrick’s extremities as he sleeps:

Twenty pegs remained in the bag. I rolled up his shirt. I pinched what fat I could find on his flank and clamped it. Something extra sparked when I pegged his navel—the pleasure of slotting a book into its space on the shelf, or a teacup on its saucer—as if the whole world were built from these tiny absences that invoked the presence of something else. (260)

This thought returns later in the scene when she feels a rush of disgust: “I couldn’t tell whether I hated him or myself—as if we were those twinned objects, the absence of one programmed into the other.” (261) These are not ideas the character would have articulated had I not been exploring them in my critical research. In a similar fashion, the writing of my novel reinforced claims I was making in my critical chapters in reference to my creative process, what rhythm *feels like* to me as a writer—rhythm as an initiating and emergent force. The twin labours of writing my novel and building my critical thesis bled into each other at the level of thematic content as well as form.

We ended the last chapter on a quote from Deleuze, which I did not include in full, but which I will return to now:

And what is this creative emotion, if not precisely a cosmic memory that actualizes all the levels at the same time, that liberates man from the plane (*plan*) or the level that is proper to him, in order to make him a creator, adequate to the whole movement of creation?... It is the genesis of

intuition in intelligence. If man accedes to the open creative totality, it is therefore by acting, by creating rather than by contemplating. (111)

And so we know this about rhythm: it is activating. We activate rhythm, and rhythm activates us. Rhythm initiates and emerges from the process of our creation—that is, our creative process—and provides a bridge to readers, viewers, listeners who activate and are activated by acceding to the “open creative totality,” which contains the potential to empower and disturb.

DEMI-GODS

In the golden age, we communed with gods.

A god could be hidden, barely contained,
inside the costumes of normal men.

Nothing was certain. How could you refuse
a beggar's request or a gambler's wager,
the bold advance of the boss's only daughter,
without fear of causing offence to a god?

You would say yes. In the golden age,
whatever was offered, you would say yes.

—Frances Leviston, “The Golden Age”

The Beach House

We must have met the brothers in 1950, because USA had defeated England in the FIFA World Cup. They arrived with the sun in them, their bodies hard and tan like peanuts, eyes chlorine blue—even in the woods, my bedroom, the log where Patrick burned the moths with a magnifying glass. Kenneth was handsome except the bridge of his nose where his brother had thrown a dictionary at his face. The bump made his smile slope. I knew he and my sister loved each other when she made a daisy chain and he tucked it in the pocket of his shorts. I wondered if Patrick and I loved each other. He had carved cheeks, a hairless chest and floral lips, like he had been sucking on a sweet. He preferred secluded places to play: we swam by ourselves; we lay under my bed where I found it difficult to breathe. The moths made me cry later, but I didn't tell him to stop. Their khaki wings looked folded from rice paper. I imagined ten moths circling a candle to form a lantern. One antenna was crooked. The wings ignited like dog-eared pages in a book.

I have been thinking about memory as a space we dwell in. A dwelling. On the one hand, the word denotes a residence, the place we return to—a house, a warm doorway, a nest. On the other, dwelling indicates a process of reflection. A lingering.

Maybe both involve lingering.

1950—Salt Spring Island, British Columbia

On the first morning, Kenneth slept in; Joan buttered toast soldiers for Luke in the kitchen; Patrick and I slurped cornflakes at the table. Mom's dollhouse had disappeared. Dad had built it for her when he designed the beach house, off the same blueprints, slicing every wall to scale. The dollhouse stood no more than twelve inches high, and Mom kept it on the nesting tables by the window. I loved it, because my dad had joined the pine with his hands, because Mom kept it after he left. Eugene hated it for the same reason. The real beach house too. He wanted to sell. He left his yacht in San Diego—they could sell that also. Use the money to demolish this pile of driftwood and build a nicer one, he would say. To which my mother would laugh: You couldn't build a fucking sandwich, Gene. Which made him hate the dollhouse even more.

So he was pleased when it disappeared. He couldn't smooth the smile from his mouth.

Maybe someone tossed it in the chuck where it belongs, he said, leaning against the kitchen counter—the ease of his stance undermined by how his fingers clamped the coffee cup.

That's where someone belongs, she said. Her kimono gaped over her underwear, which had collected the blue dye of a pillowcase in the wash. By contrast, he had dressed in suit trousers and a starched shirt, his sleeves cuffed around his forearms.

He opened his mouth to return something snide, but she swallowed whatever he said with a shoulder-racking, lung-scraping cough. Intentionally, I think. Eugene traced his finger around the lip of his coffee mug as he waited for the cough to end. When his fingernail dipped into the hot liquid, he lifted it to his mouth.

Patrick didn't tell me to follow him, but I understood he wanted me to. He slid through the French doors, away from their bickering, and meandered down the lawn, onto the dirt path that wound to the beach. Here, he dangled a whip of kelp at his side and slashed empty crab shells from the rock. I imagined the beach stones were lava and leapt from log to log to avoid melting my shins. I was nine years old, he was eleven. He didn't speak as we walked. By now Mom and Eugene would be hurling insults at each other, which I hated more than when they petted each other's hands. So I trailed after him, springing between logs, kneeling for balance if I landed an unsteady one, tiptoeing along the lip of a trunk that had been hollowed by lightning. Long ago, a blue rowboat had been dumped on the beach grass beside the fort, the turf grown over it now, as if trying to reclaim the wood. Instead of climbing inside the fort, Patrick stopped at the boat and dropped his pack.

Help me lift this, he said.

Rust etched over the gunwale like dry blood; prongs of grass wedged through a gap in the bottom planks.

Why do you want it?

He crouched and dug two hands under the stern of the boat. —Get the other side, he said.

I was scared to find what lived under there. Joan said there were water snakes and I imagined cords of them nesting under the hull. I didn't mind snakes if I couldn't see them, but worried they would shoot from the grass up my ankles.

I'm waiting.

It's not going to float, if that's what you're thinking.

He didn't reply. Finally I leaned forward and slid the smallest segments of my fingers under the gunwale. We pried the boat from the grass that had clamped around it. If I looked down, I would panic and fling my side of the boat, even if I saw only shadow or beach crabs, so I trained my eyes on Patrick opposite me, who lifted his end of the boat higher than I could. Together, we flipped it onto the keel. No

snakes shook from the grass, but in a pocket of rubbery beach weed sat a clutch of two eggs. Each was no larger than the butt of my palm, the shells clay green, murmured with black splashes.

Patrick swooped down and pinched one between his finger and thumb. —You think it's hot enough to fry eggs on the rock?

Put that back.

Why?

It's a baby.

He opened his mouth and lay the egg on his tongue, kissed his lips around it. After a moment, he parted his teeth and pushed the wet egg back into his palm.

What will you do for me?

He closed his fist around the egg and started to squeeze.

I worried the scent of his sweat and saliva would scare the mother. The thought of these two green eggs abandoned under the rowboat with no mother's belly to warm them welled tears in my eyes. I didn't want him to see.

Stop that.

What will you do?

Just put them down.

He smiled. In a smooth motion, he tucked the egg back in the nest, wiped his hand on his jeans and nipped a crushed cigarette from his pocket. He massaged the paper to reshape it and struck a match on the rock.

Come on, he said, pulling on the cigarette with his girlish lip. —Let's go for a sail.

He dragged the grass-chewed, wind-rattled boat to the water. He pushed the bow into the seafoam. Liquid sucked through the gap in the bottom planks and the hull filled an inch.

You don't mind getting a little wet, do you? he asked and held the stern steady for me to climb in.

It'll sink.

You scared, then?

I trained my eyes on him to test if he was serious. He wore a white T-shirt stuffed into blue jeans, which he had rolled around his knees. With the cigarette hanging from his mouth, he looked like a hobo from the desert who hunted rattlesnakes and skinned them for boots. I stepped carefully into the boat and sat in the nearest wood seat. The hull sank deeper. He climbed in and pushed the boat from the shore with his forearms, perching opposite me on the middle bench. The hull filled with more water, but we managed to float, as if the salt pushed us up and down at the same time. The sea filled my socks, the cold unravelling a shock up my back. I resolved to visit the eggs the next day for signs of the mother. I'd sit on them myself if I had to.

Patrick grabbed the two chipped paddles that hung from the oarlocks. —What are you waiting for? You have to bail.

He started to row. I folded my fingers together and scooped water with my hands.

My dad owns a boat, he said. Twenty times bigger than this one.

That's impossible.

He lets me sail it on my own.

You're fibbing.

What do you know?

Our vessel drifted, half-submerged, from the shore. We bobbed past the harbour light, toward the more open stretch of ocean that linked the islands. It was a warm day, the bay sluggish around us—vitamin green, unbroken by waves. I swam here often; from the harbour light I could still front-stroke to shore. After ten minutes, Patrick's rowing started to flag. No matter how vigorously he heaved the oars, or I pushed out water, we continued to droop into the sea. Finally, he steered us to a rocky point where the island tongued underwater and the boat could rest in its own shallow pool. I felt embarrassed for him. I unbuckled my Mary Janes and tipped out the water. If the leather dried with salt streaks, Eugene would take one of the shoes and bend me over his knee and whack my bum.

When I looked up, Patrick was watching me with a hooked smile. His jeans were drenched and the water had splashed up his shirt, the cotton slick to his stomach, an air bubble at his navel.

What? I said.

His stare flickered to the space beside me. I turned to find a ruddy, fifteen-inch jellyfish bumping over the sunken lip of the boat. I gasped and pressed myself to the opposite side. I heard a soft plashing and imagined the jelly wobbling at my waist, but I couldn't bring myself to look, and it might have been water shushing over the rocks. After a moment, I worried Patrick had stopped talking to stall me, the creature inching closer without my notice. I glanced down. At the same instant, the tide nudged the jelly over the lip of the boat. Its mass wafted toward my lap. The bell sprawled the water like an open wound, the net of stingers grazing my thighs. I could feel the weight of them above my trousers. A low howl built in my throat, but I was too scared to cry in case the movement drew it closer. Then I knew the jelly didn't sting my legs through the pedal pushers, because I could feel it now—my right forearm where the tentacles seared my wrist. That's when I leapt from the water and clambered the rocks to the bluff ten feet above, where I buckled and pressed my burning arm into the dry grass. The creature still crashed into my mind, and I imagined it enfolding me, tangling my arms in its lattice. Patrick climbed the bluff a few minutes later with a handful of wet sea lettuce. He took my wrist and pressed the weeds onto the sting, which had started to blister. The pressure of his hand and the cool plants relieved the burn for a moment, but soon it started all over.

You know what kind of jelly that was?

I ignored him, clutching his hand tighter to ease the pain and my shaking, the jagged breath in my chest.

Lion's mane, he said. The biggest species of jellyfish in the world. One specimen measured a hundred and thirty feet. Longer than a blue whale.

I tried not to listen to him and focused on my breath, my heartbeat, how far we had floated, the direction of the house. Behind us, a branch cracked in the wood. We both turned. Something scampered

into the undergrowth—a rabbit or deer, probably. I continued to scan the trees behind us. After a moment, he spoke again.

I'll pee on it if you want.

I snatched my arm from his grip. —Oh scram. I've had enough of your ideas.

Jellyfish tentacles have thousands of sting cells called nematocysts. To deactivate them on the skin it's best to apply vinegar. Urine's second best.

This is your fault. Let's go back.

How long will that take?

I sighed. My irritation with him was increasing the pain. A string of bumps had flushed up my forearm. A sob welled in my throat. I bent over and let the warm tears spill on my wrist to soothe the burn.

Why don't *you* pee on it, then? he said.

It won't work.

It's better than nothing. I won't look.

He rotated on the rock and squatted in the opposite direction, out to sea. I realized I did have to pee, that I hadn't gone since that morning. I sniffed and wiped my eyes with my good wrist. Patrick whistled. A pretty tune I couldn't place, maybe a hymn. It comforted me—our silence, his whistling, the waves turning below. The sting hurt, but no more than the time I disturbed a wasp nest and got nipped three times on the thigh. Patrick continued to survey the sea. I fingered the button on my pedal-pushers, then pressed it through the hole and pulled my pants around my knees. I pushed my underwear out of the way and released a stream of urine onto my forearm. It burned more, but that felt okay—like it sealed the sharper, isolated burns. A dark trickle dropped down the rock toward Patrick. I could tell we were both listening. Finally, I pulled up my pants. The damp spread in the crotch of my underwear, beads of it smearing onto my thighs. I felt proud. As if I had passed his test.

I think we're that way. He pointed left, where the bluff receded into dark needling trees.

He did not congratulate me as we walked, or acknowledge how brave I was. He stopped whistling and hiked a few paces ahead on the rock.

The urine had dried on my wrist by the time we returned to the house, releasing a light musk. The row between Mom and Eugene had subsided. Eugene had changed into swim trunks so he could wash the car. His stomach pouched over the waistband, black hairs crawling from his belly button, the sun lancing off his shoulders. Mom dozed in her striped deck chair with a lime soda on the table beside her, a book folded over her ribs like armour. Joan and Kenneth lounged on the grass with a pineapple, Kenneth prying reedy wedges with his Swiss Army knife, passing them to Joan, who sucked the fruit and whipped the husks at the Gravenstein. Patrick hadn't said a word on the walk home. Now he knelt on the grass and prodded the hydrangea bush. Something filled his hand. I recognized it then—a fragment of the dollhouse roof.

Where'd you find that? I asked, too loud.

He shushed me.

You wrecked it, I said.

He shoved me inside, past Luke and his rock tumbler. My brother pretended not to notice. He lay on his stomach before two piles of stones, one raw from the beach, the other glossy as marbles. I sprinted up the stairs—shaken by the sight of the dollhouse, overwhelmed by this insult to my dad, even if he never knew it.

Hardly a second after I stepped into my bedroom, Patrick slammed the door and shoved a chair under the knob. —You won't say a word, he said. About the jellyfish either.

I barely heard him; I was thinking about how Dad had spent hours sanding the wood and fitting the walls together. He even cut drapes from the fabric Mom had used for the real curtains.

Patrick leafed through my dirty clothes on the floor. After a moment, he shoved a long-sleeved shirt in my hands. Then I saw what he saw—a manacle of stings had branded my wrist. Slowly, widening the sleeve so it wouldn't chafe, I pulled the shirt over my head.

How do I know you won't tell? he said.

He sat in silence a few moments, the itchy blue of his eyes settling on his lap as he turned the roof fragment in his hand, the skin between his thumb and index finger moist and catching light, blistered from the paddle. He motioned for me to sit beside him on the bed. I joined him there, my heels tucked under my bum. He took my hand on his knee and turned it so my palm faced the ceiling. Then he pressed the broken wood into my skin.

What are you doing? I yanked my hand away.

He snatched it back, pinning my wrist on the bed, then grabbed my other arm, the one with the burns. The pain made me gasp. He closed my fist around the splintered pine and together, with his force, we pushed the point into my hand.

I closed my eyes and waited for the skin to break, but he released his grip.

I'll give you a choice, he said.

Outside the room, dishes clattered for lunch, the kettle boiling, Joan arguing with Mom in a shrill voice, Luke trying to show both of them his stones.

You will have to do something so embarrassing you would be ashamed to tell, he continued. But don't worry. You do it every day.

What?

Relieve yourself.

Are you bonkers? I already—

Not that way.

We fell quiet. I waited for him to crack a smile and say, Got you, but his expression remained fixed.

You can clean off in the bathroom after.

I snatched the wood from the bed and dug it into the heart of my palm. The edge was dull. I could feel a divot where the skin had bruised. After thirty seconds, I couldn't press any deeper. I released my grip and hucked the piece under the dresser.

Patrick smiled kindly. —I'll give you privacy, he said.

The door clicked behind him. I sat on the mattress and stared at the wall, the crocheted sparrow and pine cones, the painting of a young girl kneeling before a tide pool, and thought: Okay. I can do this one thing. Soon it would be over. I detected movement in my guts. Often I can't go easily—not every day—but the adrenaline loosened the gunk from my intestine and I could feel it shifting. I removed my pedal pushers and squatted on the carpet with my underwear still on and pushed. The vulgarity of the action made me want to laugh—it excited me in a strange way. I could pass all of his tests, even the naughty ones. With one more push, the feces slinked out of me and filled the crotch of my underwear. It felt hot and dense under my bum cheeks. I started to laugh. I clutched my panties under me so the poo wouldn't slip out and opened the door for the bathroom. Patrick stood there, facing me. He looked down at my hand, his nostrils flaring. He stepped out of my way and I ran to the toilet.

*

Before the brothers arrived, Joan, Luke and I built the beach fort together. We found swoops in the trees to lounge in, brought pitchers of lemonade so we could nestle in the branches with cold glasses in our palms. We climbed on each other like bodybuilders; we practised headstands, we watched sailboats through binoculars, we counted bald eagles, we built fires from moss and dry seagrass, we dug bait, we dangled worms from our hooks, we caught crab in wood traps. They were larger than our hands, but we turned them over to check the underside triangle, we tossed the rounded triangles back to the sea where they drifted to the sand on top of each other. The summer we met the brothers, Luke started to shine rocks by himself. He organized his stamps in a leather binder. Here and there he followed us.

I was late for lunch because I had to wash in the basin and bury my soiled underwear in the earth where no animal would smell it. For lunch, Mom and Joan made devilled eggs and ham sandwiches. I wasn't hungry. A bilgy sweetness clung to my fingers, though I had soaped my hands.

When I sat down, Eugene was lecturing his sons on the Senate race in California. Kenneth had stuffed an entire bread roll in his mouth and gnawed at the dough with his jaw open. Patrick ate his salad with a knife and fork—slitting each cherry tomato in half, lining them up on a leaf of lettuce. At the same time, he read from a book open on his lap. No one seemed to think that was rude. I had seen the spine the night before—a pocketbook of quotations. When he spoke to adults, he sounded so articulate for an eleven-year-old; I wondered if he had woven entire quotes into his speech. Some words sounded awkward on his tongue, as though he had never heard them aloud before.

Patrick, are you listening?

Yes.

What did I say?

His eyes moistened, as if hurt by the accusation he was lying. Eugene stilled his eyes on his son, and within seconds, Patrick looked bored again. That's how I knew he was faking.

You were discussing the leading candidates, he said.

I'd never heard the word "candidate" before. It had a lovely sound—how the syllables lingered on *can* before falling. *Can-di-det*, I repeated to myself. I wanted to remember. *Can-di-det*.

I don't like either of them, he continued. No one else noticed how he read from the book. —They have all the virtues I dislike and none of the vices I admire.

Eugene's cheeks tightened. Kenneth rolled his eyes at my sister, who smiled receptively.

—Of course he's listening, Mom said. Good boy. Do you want a sip of my mimosa?

Luke chewed a devilled egg with his mouth open and washed it down with lemonade, crumbs of yolk and paprika sprinkling his lips. As if to break the silence, he said, Mom, is Willa not eating because she's poisoned from the jellyfish?

Patrick looked up sharply. I felt an urge to step between him and my brother. I stroked Luke's chubby elbow and said, Don't be silly.

I saw from the cliff. It was bigger than your head.

He pulled his arm away to indicate the size.

Eugene wiped his mouth and leaned on his elbow. My mother spoke before he could, refilling Luke's lemonade. —Don't tell tales, darling.

I'm not. Show them your owie.

Patrick's stare pressed into me now. —Luke, I said, trying to wring the panic from my voice.

They were in a boat and a jelly stung Willa's arm.

He reached for my hand on the table. I let him push up my sleeve. Joan gasped—the sores had spread and looked irritated, as if my entire arm had been wrung with barbed wire.

It looks worse than it is, I said.

Patrick made her, Luke said.

He climbed from his chair and shot outside. The table fell into a stiff silence before he returned with a fistful of leaves and wall fragments. —First he broke the house, he explained, as if the two events were causally linked.

Patrick eyed his plate with a sort of impatience. My mother reached for the shards in Luke's hands, rubbed a strip of pine with her thumb, Joan dabbing my arm, telling Kenneth to bring ice wrapped in a cloth, Kenneth reaching for another devilled egg, Eugene reddening from his chair, eyes bright with anger.

Get up, Eugene said. He marched Patrick by the elbow into his study—Eugene's footsteps stuttering from his bad toe. I followed. I watched from the open door as he clipped Patrick's cheek with the back of his hand.

Say "ah," he said.

Patrick opened his lips. His father lay a roll of pennies widthwise on his tongue. The paper wedged his cheeks apart. When he saw me in the doorway, it looked like he was grinning.

1953—Salt Spring Island and San Diego, California

I didn't see Patrick again until three years later, when we drove to California for Kenneth's high school graduation. San Diego sounded exotic to us, though it echoed the Spanish of other islands like Quadra, Galiano, Cortes. The brothers had boasted of their beaches—you'd never cut your heel on a barnacle; wagons parked on the beach to sell ice cream; women had hair the colour of white sand; men were so strong they carried women on their shoulders; children learned to surf before they learned their times tables.

In the week leading up to our trip, Joan and I lay in a circle of plum pits and cut moon-shaped faces from *Silver Screens* she bought in Victoria. She thought she might get discovered in California; I promised to move with her. We would live in a sun-washed walk-up with plastic flamingos and palm trees, a vine of watermelon that drooped off the front porch. She told me about the stars while I ate wet segments of melon I'd packed from the kitchen—*this is Ava Gardner. You liked her in The Killers, remember? Her parents were poor tobacco farmers from North Carolina, isn't that stunning?* She had taken to the word “stunning” that summer. *Oh—Lana Turner! I love her, don't you? What a stunning black stole.* To me it looked as if a black cub had wilted around her collar. I shrugged and flicked a watermelon seed into an empty bottle of Mountain Dew. It made sense we should save them, I thought. So we could plant a patch when we moved.

Dad had pinned brochures for California on the walls of his old office in Victoria: a bodybuilder squatted on the sand and steadied a blond woman on his lap. She arched back with one hand on her hip, the other stretched above her, her feet pressing into his thighs. A second man stood on his hands upside down over her belly button. In another poster, a woman flew between two men, her arms opened behind her like swallow wings. Then a poster of Manhattan beach, which wasn't anywhere near Manhattan: the

road dipping to the pier like you could drive right into the sea. And all the blinking neon, the smooth Chryslers, women with gold thighs and muscular bums, men lifting dumbbells, cars parked on the sand.

The weekend before we left, our Sunday school teacher asked Joan to describe the three heavens. Joan recited from her notebook:

The first is the realm of birds and clouds that circles the earth. The second is the space beyond, where you'd find the sun, moon and stars. The third heaven, she said, is a thousand miles south of here on the I-5, where beach bums tan and surf and sing holy holy holy. Miss Edgar was not amused. She asked Joan to copy the correct description of heaven onto the blackboard and didn't notice that she changed the words: *it shone with the glory of famous people, and its brilliance was that of a precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal ... the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates be shut, for there will be no night there.*

If California was our promised land, Patrick and Kenneth were prophets. Their figures gold and slender, their ears and eyebrows on an even plane, eyes glimmering blue like the sun on oiled nickels. Their clavicles ran the length of their shoulders. Pea-sized notches marked the centres of their bodies, their stomachs so lean you could see the divisions of their abdomens. Their shoulder blades were wing bones. I expected their arms to start pounding and lift them up.

It took three days to drive, sleeping in motels with bony mattresses, eating pancakes at roadside cafés, buying baskets of blueberries from farm stalls, our fingers blackening with every handful as the fruit decomposed in the heat.

Kenneth's graduation ceremony was long and hot. We circulated the same metal flask of water, dabbing our foreheads, fanning our chests with the paper programs until they finished calling students across the stage. Eugene's ex-wife appeared, and Mom excused herself to the restroom. Joan greeted her—a blonde who used to model for Colegate toothpaste. When I waved to Patrick, he didn't respond. I

went over to him and said, Hi. How's it going. He stared through me as if he could see to the other side of my skull and said, Back later, Mom. I'm going to catch up with Vincent.

The next day, Eugene took all of us to the zoo. The boys arrived in a pack of high school friends, whose tickets Eugene was forced to buy. Again, Patrick pretended not to hear when I called his name. They all stared at Joan. I remember she wore tapered slacks, Mom's eggshell blouse with the scalloped collar. Her cheeks had turned already, as leaves turn. The sun collected on her shoulders—a dust down her back that pinched each nut of her spine. I have come to recognize this week in California as the fulcrum, this moment at its centre, beginning to tip. On one side, Joan and I bathed together, dipped in the cold lagoon, spread our bodies over the grass like tablecloths. On the other side, Joan stood in our mother's clothes. Her hand pushed the curl that kept falling back into the crown of her new sun hat. She ignored me when I said the brim looked like a flying saucer, when I hummed the theremin tone from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. She turned fifteen that summer, but we shared eelish hips and swimsuits. Under Mom's blouse, Joan's spine was a column of limpet shells.

Luke bought popcorn and peanuts in a cone. He ate like the chimp ate, his mouth banana'd so he caught every nut. When he chewed this way at home, Eugene stared at Joan until she told Luke to stop. I couldn't see Eugene in the concession line, where he'd gone to buy Mom a Sprite. Mom had wandered down the path to the bear cage. She stood nearer to the cage than the other mothers. The other mothers juggled lemonades in their fists, fried dough, a stuffed penguin, their child's palm. Mom leaned with her back against the fence, her fingers fidgeting to loosen her collar. When she freed enough skin, she fanned a copy of *Zoonooz* against her throat. The bears posed behind her. One sat on his tailbone and clasped his heels. Another swayed on his hind legs, front paws shined out. His stance mirrored my mother's, who turned to grip the fence with both hands. A third bear pressed his paws together in prayer or clapping. They moved only as much as they needed not to fall.

On the central boulevard, a peacock weaved through the crowd. At first no one but me saw him. He wound between bare shins and espadrilles, a woman's sandals. I worried a heel would puncture his

neck. Only Joan followed my gaze. His thousand eyes swept aside corn cobs and drink straws, the oily papers from doughnuts. A lollipop stuck to his tail. Joan scooped a handful of popcorn from Luke's cone and bent to feed the peacock. The bird stabbed his beak into her palm. Later I saw the holes he made, as if he had filled her hand with seeds.

Eugene found Mom at the bear cage. She clasped the bottle of Sprite to her temple. The peacock threaded between my sister's ankles. He sidestepped a child with a pretzel and picked his path toward the ladies' toilets. I wanted to follow him. Not to the toilets. I wanted to nap in the green hammock of his tail feathers. Instead, I went to find the Antarctic exhibition.

They had painted the pavement to simulate ice. There might have been real ice too, but I felt warm. The sun filled my eyes, and when I closed them, a locust shape drifted across my eyelids. It felt nice to be alone. Other girls my age, twelve or younger, stood with their parents and pleaded with them to buy bottles of Coke. Eugene'd given me a roll of pennies to spend. I could buy ten bottles of Coke. I stood in the centre of the walkway and watched the penguins. They spat back and forth on their water chute.

After the Antarctic exhibit, I found the others still waiting at the bear cage. My family stood away from the other families, collected as if by accident. No one spoke or shared a point of focus. Only Eugene watched the bears. My mother tipped against the cage, her eyes closed, the bottle of Sprite dangling from her fingers. Luke crouched on the dirt and lured a woodbug up his arm with a corn kernel. Joan stood apart from them and searched for me, or the peacock, which had disappeared in the same direction. Kenneth and Patrick bummed on the table outside the concession stand with their high school friends. Energy hummed through them, pushed the boys to jostle and wing onion rings in the air. The boys, too, looked like locusts. A nicotine swarm of jeans, hair parted at the back. In time, Joan would call this a ducktail. She would oil Kenneth's hair for him, comb it into quiffs. He watched her now. Cigarettes passed between the boys' fingers. Patrick tapped his ash into a Coke bottle, then in the part of another boy's tail. Unlike my family, the guys shared a point of focus. My sister did not realize her braid sagged from her hat, the end still tucked so the hair looped down and up in a sling. This one imperfection undermined how

carefully she stood, her breast lifted, the heel of her front foot nestled in the arch of the rear. It made her look vulnerable. But she knew she was watched. Their gaze lifted her into a new dimension. She found herself in their want: an ideal cast of herself. Their want changed her. She saw her body in gold and spun toward this image.

That evening I watched her dress. I asked her, When the sun's bright, do you ever see a locust inside your eye? She said, Willa, there's no such thing as one locust. Locusts are swarms. She missed the point. What if he belonged to a swarm? What if he fell behind? But she was no longer listening. One locust is a grasshopper, she said. She had traded her slacks for white beach shorts, Mom's blouse for an ice-cream-blue Orlon sweater. Mom scanned Joan's legs in the hotel lobby. It was too late in the day to display her thighs, but she didn't say anything. At Peking Café, no one wanted to eat. Patrick and Kenneth had plans for a movie, and Eugene wouldn't let Joan go. In protest, she hardly spoke. Even Luke sat quietly. In each well of silence, Eugene ordered another dish. Orange chicken, tomatoes and beef. The plates began to crowd our table. Pork chow-mein, he ordered. Spring rolls. All I wanted was a bowl of egg flower soup, because I never knew eggs bloomed flowers. I wondered if they looked like daisies. I played a game where I ate the rice off my plate grain by grain. Joan parted the noodles with her fork and pushed them to the side of her plate.

Willa, said Eugene.

I looked up in surprise.

How did you like the bears?

Pardon me?

Which bear did you prefer?

Eugene did not typically pose questions to me. He preferred to ask Mom or Joan.

I'm not sure.

I liked the tall ones, he said.

No one replied. I wondered if he meant the bears on hind legs.

Joan sliced a flower of broccoli and flattened the buds with her knife. It looked like a peacock fan. One thousand eyes, so green they were nearly puce. As our silence thickened, Eugene waved down the waiter, who wore a pale waistcoat. I expected to find the fabric marbled with sauces and steams, but over the evening, his vest stayed as white as his teeth.

Could we try an order of Mongolian beef? asked Eugene.

We hadn't eaten enough from any plate for the waiter to clear space. Mom looked embarrassed. She had tied a pretty scarf around her neck, but one of the knots was undone. The corner of her scarf trailed her plate.

I leaned across the table and grabbed her scarf before it touched the orange chicken.

She lifted her head.

Willa, don't reach, said Eugene.

I sulked back in my chair.

I thought they looked tired, said Mom.

All of us looked at her. Mom inspected the corner of her scarf. She pulled a loose thread, which tugged longer. She frowned and released the scarf back to her breast.

After a few minutes, the waiter returned with a plate of glistening beef. To make room, we balanced our dumpling saucers on the rims of larger plates. We balanced our teacups on the rims of the saucers. I could not see the tablecloth. I saw treacle marinades and bright lumps of pork.

I liked the elephant, said Luke.

Joan dangled a knife over her plate. —Because he had a long knob? she said.

Luke opened his mouth. He knew enough to be offended, though he didn't grasp why.

What? asked Eugene.

Joan stabbed a water chestnut with her knife and smiled at me as she chewed it.

What did she say? Eugene asked Mom.

But Mom was lost in her satellite of thought. The loose thread had latched to the chicken glaze. Waiter, said Eugene. Could we have another plate of egg foo yung?

After dinner, Joan and I sat on the hotel bed with a bag of pears from the fruit market. I had questions for her, like would she marry Kenneth? What did she write to him on Mom's blue stationery? Did she remember when our neighbour Ko-Ko taught us to fold the paper into frogs? But I didn't trust who would answer. She sat like she always sat, her knees open, legs splayed on the mattress. Her hair held the same crimps as if pressed inside seashells. Yet I sensed she was not the same girl who dug clam gardens with me. We sat together like normal, but I did not know what words to say. An eyelash had fallen onto her cheek. I felt I could lick my finger, press the pad to her skin and remove the eyelash, and that action would come more naturally than speech. We could sit spine to spine and align our backs and fill the notches of each other's vertebrae. Our bodies had matured together like trees. Two trees shovelled into the same soil, competing for sun, limbs warped and forking, needles interlocked. This trip to San Diego instilled new hopes in her—new pleasures and vanities—yet our limbs wound the same loops, the same paths around each other's elbows.

What? she said, her eyes moist. From emotion or allergies, I couldn't tell. —You're staring. She lowered her gaze to the pears in her lap.

I leaned forward and wiped the eyelash from her cheek. I blew it off my finger and made a wish: to catch up with her. The thin spike drifted to the pillowcase. She passed me a fruit. Around us, the bedsheets matched the paint on the walls, green as the underside of a leaf, or bathwater. We knelt in the bathwater and smelled the bellies of the pears before we bit them. They were overripe, the skin bruised and gold. The fruit weighed in our palms like heavy bells.

That night, I lay under the sheets and she slept beside me over them. Her legs stretched long across the bed, a lavender brown like her arms. I woke to a pebble on the window glass. Beside me, the weight shifted on the mattress. I opened my eyes as she yawned and swayed her legs to the floor.

What are you doing? I whispered.

She raised a finger to her lips. —Go back to sleep.

I folded my arms across my chest.

She lifted her shorts from the floor and tugged them over her hips. I wanted to ask her not to go.

Shh, she whispered again, as if I did ask. —You're sleeping.

She kissed her palm to my nose and stepped outside. I watched the forecourt from our window. A boy stood beneath the tree in a blue baseball cap—Kenneth, I assumed. Her figure appeared. The moon paled her legs as she tipped up on her toes to kiss him. I could follow the line of her calves down the street long after his shape sunk into shadow.

The next day, we visited Eugene's yacht at the marina. I thought we might go for a sail, but he only let us sit on the deck and eat sandwiches. He stalked the length of the schooner, his bad foot dragging a second behind the other one. He slapped the masts, thick as tree trunks, tugged at odd ropes. I began to suspect he didn't know how to sail, and exchanged a look with Joan.

Genie, she said, mimicking Mom's voice. —You ever take it out of the mooring?

Mom slapped her. Not hard, but Joan bit the inside of her cheek.

What's that? Eugene called from the bow, marching back to us proudly.

My sister dabbed her cheek with her finger, scowled at the deck.

She asked about the boat's history, said Mom.

He punctuated the floorboards with his loafer. —She was built forty years ago. For a treasure-hunting expedition to Central America.

Cool, said Luke.

He's lying, said Joan.

Mom raised her eyebrows at her, as if to say, You want another one?

There were lots of expeditions back then, sport. The Spanish kept their doubloons somewhere.

What's a doubloon?

A gold coin. Worth two escudos.

So did you hunt treasure, Uncle Eugene?

'Fraid not, champ. I bought her off a fisherman.

Why?

Mom pulled Luke onto her lap to hush him and said, Who wants a ham sandwich and who wants cheese?

Cheese, said Luke.

Ham, said Eugene.

I'm not eating, said Joan.

Me neither, I said, in imitation, adding a sigh to announce my boredom. *Greta* wasn't huge compared to the ferries from Vancouver Island. What was the big deal?

On the final day of our trip, Patrick and Kenneth arrived to swim at the hotel, though their mother had a pool at the house in La Jolla, the shape of a kidney bean. Kenneth wanted to see my sister and Eugene would not let her visit La Jolla without a chaperone. Joan had bought a new swim costume in town—white, ruched up the waist, strapless. I was stuck in my pilled yellow suit with a flamingo on the belly. I swam by myself in the deep end and practised diving for coins, which I dropped to the bottom before I dove from the deck, my eyes open under water. I could see their feet kicking from the other end of the pool, the suds from their heels and long calves, Kenneth and Joan pedalling to tread water, Patrick floating a circle around them until he left to swim lengths. I resented them for excluding me, but I was a strong diver. I could enter the water cleanly and arrow to the bottom for the coin. Off the high board, I could even do a somersault. That was enough payback for now. I cut the air like a pelican while the others flapped below, muscling sloppy lengths. The hotel had plastered the bottom of the pool with a prickly material,

which glittered sage from the surface. The four of us had the pool to ourselves, though a small girl played on the deck with a yo-yo while her mother blew air into an inflatable turtle.

Eugene had given us each money for a sandwich, so when my stomach started to growl, I climbed from the pool and padded to the change room. The café in the lobby sold apple pie and something called a Hollywood salad; I couldn't wait to sit on the terrace in my cat's-eye sunglasses and eat Hollywood salad like Lana Turner. I stepped onto the melon-pink tiles and rotated the shower tap. I had not brought my own soap, and the fluid in the canisters smelled of laundry starch. I pushed the straps of my swimsuit down my shoulders to rinse off, the water releasing from the metal head in hot bursts. That's when he came in. I thought he had walked in the wrong change room by accident—his orange-and-black argyle swim briefs that cut just under his navel, his chest still expanding with breath from the swim. At the sight of him, I gasped and clamped my arm over my breasts. His eyes worked across my arm to where I could feel air on the bump of my left breast, which my wrist wasn't wide enough to cover. A smile spread across his face.

What are you doing? I asked.

The spray fell like snakes from a barrel of water, down the back of my head and spine, and in a moment of shock at the sensation, I stepped from the shower stream. I had moved, accidentally, toward him, my hair slicking the side of my neck, my bathing suit slung around my waist, my breasts small yet so far apart and slippery I could not hide them. Carefully, Patrick folded down the waistband of his briefs and withdrew his penis, which was an even tan colour, like his stomach. In a graceful motion, he stroked the underside of his testicles, then tightened his grip around the shaft. He beat his hand back and forth, his face crimping into a terrible sneer as his eyes traced my breasts and waist, the pubescent fat below my navel, my thighs shivering together, the bottom of my swimsuit creeping up my butt cheek with every tremble. The display disgusted me, I wanted to sock him in the chin, run from the shower soaking wet, but I couldn't move, and as I stood there watching, I felt complicit. A warmth unravelled in my groin. He slammed his palm on the wall beside him for support and shook his fist up and down his penis. The way it

had hung before stiffening reminded me of a toy elephant's trunk. This image doused the tingling sensation between my legs, and at the same moment, he groaned and released a sudsy squirt up his chest, a hot dime of it landing on my thigh. He continued to moan and rock his hand up and down as he buckled in half, breathing, and I snatched my towel from the hook and bolted from the change room.

1953—Salt Spring Island, British Columbia

On the first day back, Luke received the packet of stamps he had ordered from a catalogue. He spent the morning categorizing them by country, measuring their perforations, stroking their gums. He knelt in a pool of light in the dining room, his leather album beside him, a magnifying glass, the flannel of his pyjamas wound around his knees. In his palm, he fingered a copper-shelled beetle on a blue frame. Cuba 1950.

In the study, Eugene folded his socks. He owned a delicate selection—calf-length, dandelion green. He did not fold them how Dad folded them, the way he'd learned in the war. Eugene pressed the socks together to fold them in thirds, then opened the elastic and tucked the toes inside. The pairs formed neat parcels, which he arranged in a row in his suitcase. I wondered who'd taught him to fold socks so discreetly. Eugene did not fight in the war.

The kitchen smelled sunny with coffee. No one had cooked, but I could smell the fragrance of other mornings. Charred toast, sulphurous eggs, newsprint. Dad wiping yolk off his chin with a corner of the business page. I lifted the lid of the percolator. The basin was full—no one had touched it. So I poured myself a cup. The liquid smelled vinegary up close. I could not bring myself to sip, but I didn't want to waste the coffee either. I carried the mug outside.

Mom sat on the terrace swing in a network of afghans. The wool bound her feet at the bottom like a fish's tail. She drank what looked like cream from a whisky tumbler. A cigarette balanced between her fingers, Eugene's carton open beside her. She lowered her glass and smoked. After a studied drag, she tapped her ash into one half of an oyster shell.

Is that you, Will?

I stepped onto the terrace and shut the French door behind me.

She said: Sometimes I think of you as a forest creature.

Like a metal, her voice warmed and cooled with her environment or whom she spoke to.

You know what I mean, don't you? she said.

I stared into the sunlight. She watched me blinking and smiled. I think I did know what she meant, but I didn't want to get it wrong. I let her continue.

I'm never alone in the forest, she said. Even if it's silent, I will find bushtits and minks and voles.

Bears, I said, thinking of the zoo.

Sure, bears. Mountain lions. Bryophytes.

I waited.

Moss, she said.

She smoothed her hair into place and sipped from her drink. She used to curl her hair and fold it inside a snood, or else plait a wreath behind her ears around the crown of her head. I was relieved when she cut it. I worried she would stop combing and her hair would grow stringy, and I'd have to listen to other women's comments at Ganges. Salt Spring Island was a small place.

You have to be particularly mindful of moss, she said.

She lifted the cigarette to her mouth and inhaled the smoke languidly. She had found a new kimono in California—honey pink, patterned with windows. Stained glass windows, grey windows, windows with birds. She released the smoke through her lips. The kimono's silk sleeves pooled around her elbows.

Have you brought me a drink? she asked.

Both our eyes lowered to the mug. I had nearly forgotten I was holding it.

Coffee, I said.

No, thanks, Ducky.

She lifted the mug from my hands and placed it on the table beside her. Joan and I used to play old maid at that table. It came from Grandmother's set of iron garden furniture.

Mom patted the cushion beside her. I climbed onto the porch swing. She lifted her glass, but paused before it reached her lips. She dipped it toward me.

Sip?

I took the tumbler with both hands, the ice bumping my teeth as I drank. The liquid tasted sweet and eggy. A curl of heat wiped the back of my tongue.

Mom took back her glass. She rocked it, watched the ice slide back and forth.

Now I'll have to get more, she said after a moment. She glanced at me, as if considering whether I could do it. After another moment, she combed my hair with her fingers and pushed it behind my ear.

Eugene's packing in the bedroom, I said.

She continued to rock the ice in her glass. The cubes plinked louder as they melted.

Big suitcase or little suitcase? she asked.

Little suitcase.

Okay, she said. Good girl.

But he's folded a lot of socks.

Has he now?

Yes.

Little suitcase, many socks, she said. What do we make of that?

She tried to sip from her glass, but there was only ice.

Maybe he wears two at once, I suggested.

She sucked a cube, then opened her mouth to spit it back. The ice was too wide to slip out subtly.

Will, she said, after she had completed the manoeuvre. —Why don't you go for a walk?

She rested her head on the back of her wrist.

Pick us some flowers, she said as she slouched, her knees nudging me off the swing. The kimono had unfurled around her heart, and I couldn't help but pinch the collar together.

Your fingers are cold, she said.

I paused, my hand between the silk and the bars of her chest, her muscles tensed. I stepped back into the sun.

Dad had built the house on Salt Spring Island's North End. It was wide, with six French doors across and as many windows—you could see the ocean through every pane. Mom furnished the main room with her mother's antique chesterfield, the leather creased like an old face, rubbed so raw in patches the material had callused. It sat opposite a rocking chair my dad had constructed from driftwood and the set of nesting tables where Mom had kept the dollhouse. The ceiling of the main room tented up like a wooden big top, painted sesame, carved into triangular panels that seemed to billow within the dome like the sails of a boat. Dad had seen the style on a business trip to New Zealand, and he spent months on the designs and construction—he would disappear to Salt Spring for entire weeks while Joan and I attended school in Victoria, the neighbour cared for Luke, and my mother puddled on the sofa, occasionally rousing herself to snip peonies from the garden, cramming the old, clammy bouquets in the trash. Dad originally planned all of the rooms for a single floor, but toward the end of construction, he decided to add a second storey behind the main dome. This extension was shoebox in shape, like the lifeless high-rises sprouting in Vancouver, but Dad hid the hard edges with a thick arm of wisteria and other vines sucking the wood. We each had our own room at the beach house, Joan's the largest with a double bed. I used to climb in with her so we could tell stories at night or tickle each other's back. Luke had his own room with sailboats painted on the walls, near the bathroom because he had trouble reaching the toilet at night. Sometimes he dragged his sheets to the tub, then lingered at our door until I tented the blankets and he wriggled in beside me and our bodies grew so warm, Joan kicked off the duvet.

Dad let us live like beach clams. We burrowed in the sand and sucked nutrients from the salt, sand fleas exploring our noses like luminous shrimp. We built clam gardens. We cleared the rock from our beach and constructed a wall. The clams stretched their tongues and spat water between our toes. Joan told us they did not have tongues but feet. We saved them from gulls so we could gather the shells

ourselves in a beach towel. Smooth, sombre clams, their shells ringed as trees. I heard them ticking inside their cases. It felt hard to believe these were live creatures, not lockets you slung around your neck. My sister gathered them in the belly of her dress. I cupped the shells to my ear and waited for the foot to swab my cheek.

Until Dad left, he and Eugene worked together for the Puget Sound Navigation Company. Eugene lived in California at this time, but travelled to Seattle regularly for work, and bought a house there. Together, he and Dad negotiated the purchase of auto ferries from San Francisco Bay. That was in 1936, one year before Mom and Dad married. Dad moved out three years after the war. It wasn't until later I realized Eugene had already left his wife and moved to the house in Seattle full-time, that he had seen my mother while Dad was overseas. He hadn't fought in the war himself because of a bad foot from polio. When Dad left, Eugene took my mother for dinner once a month and joined us for a week at the beach house. I had thought it was out of charity.

Washington State bought the Black Ball Line in 1951, and Eugene moved to the Canadian subsidiary company, Black Ball Ferries. He ran the boats between Horseshoe Bay in Nanaimo and Gibsons Landing on the Sunshine Coast. Joan and I sailed the first crossing of the Quillayute three years after Dad left. I remember we wore Easter crinolines and white socks. Mother bought strips of chiffon to tie our hats down in the wind. In Gibsons, they had threaded the streets with bunting and provincial flags. We drove off the ferry in a parade of pipers and two brass bands. Spectators sang "God Save the Queen." Children jammed the sidewalks—boys in striped jackets and Sunday shoes, girls with their hair curled into perfect sausages. And I could smell sausages. Some of the ladies' groups had set up food stalls. The children watched as we passed. They did not wave because their palms were filled with wedges of yellow cake. They stared at us and licked their fingers. A Scottie dog capered after our car and barked. The pipers led the cars to Bal's Hall for the luncheon. We found fewer children there. Aside from a few infants in prams, we were the only ones. The waiters served watercress sandwiches and roast beef. Joan and I knelt

under the table, flanked by twill trousers and nylon shins. We inspected their shoes. I could have sat there all lunch, but Joan felt silly, our legs too long. I remember two men boxed in a ring on the front lawn. We slipped outside to watch them before they served lemon pie. The boxers wore copper shorts, their chests coiled with hair. One of the men cupped the other's jaw between his gloves. The other man grunted and locked his own bulbous fists around his opponent's neck. Their shoes stamped the mat; they orbited the ring. They looked angry. And also that they might kiss.

*

In a colander, I collected: honeysuckle, trilliums, a Nootka rose. Then I rested on my secret beach. Luke and I went straight to the beach house with Mom and Eugene after we returned from California. Joan stayed in Victoria for a week-long tap dance camp with her friend Linda, a poodle-haired windbag with skinny legs. They used to babysit me together. We'd sit in her polyester room and survey the Eaton's catalogue. Joan and Linda sprayed perfume on their wrists; Linda would lift her heels onto the bed and wipe the fragrance under her knees. She learned that in France, she said. The room always smelled like Chantilly and Cheez Whiz.

One of my goals that summer was to find a phantom orchid. Joan said only one hundred grew in the province. They bloomed in columns of waxy petals, no leaves. As if someone plucked the wings off a swan and wrung them into a garland. They preferred the soil you found under cathedrals of cedar. And compost piles, shell middens. I think it's the calcium. My secret beach had a shell midden. You could see it in the dirt that cut over the sand. Grass grew overtop now. Dad said the first people tossed their shells here after they ate. Now the shells had chipped into fragments small enough to scrape inside my fingernails. I liked to imagine who ate these clams. Ten thousand years ago, someone cradled this mollusc in her mouth and sucked a fringe of chewy meat.

Dad knew a lot about the island. He hired one or two guys from the village to help build our house, and they shared morsels of information, like the best end of the island to fish for salmon. There was a contract builder on Salt Spring, and it vexed him that Dad sourced the work elsewhere. City boy, he said. After cheap labour. But I knew Dad paid everyone the same wage. I proofread his books to practise my long addition. To be honest, I think he preferred the villagers' company. He knew the island's bays too, from his marine map, which Eugene had left pinned in his study. I memorized the map so I could find new beaches. My memory started to merge this map with his other posters. He would pin inserts from *National Geographic* and *Popular Science* on the walls—in case he needed to refer to a constellation chart, say, or a diagram of the human body. As I sat on the shell heap, I began to imagine the islands as an anatomy, a system of organs. On Salt Spring, we were locked in the centre. A pancreas. Vancouver Island loomed to the south and west like our fat, glandular liver. Across from here, Kuper was what? The gallbladder? Then Galiano to the east—our descending colon. Mayne, Prevost, Pender. I wasn't sure what those were. Farther south, Washington. The anus, I guess. On an island, it's easy to feel confined.

I couldn't see anything on Kuper from my secret beach. No houses or docks or pillars of smoke. It looked the same as any shoreline from here—a green feather landmass, edged with shells. Salt Spring appeared the same from the ferry, but up close this rock was a tangle of trees. The end we lived on, anyway. Dad cleared the wood at the front of our house, which faced the sea, but the rear was hemmed by firs and alders, boughs so thick they blocked the sun. On the beach, an arbutus grew sideways from the forest. I could walk across the trunk as though it were a balance beam. The bark peeled from the boughs like sheets of butcher paper. Some of those trunks grew so crooked with salt. They were my favourite. I liked the trees with trunks bent like spoons. I liked the forking trees. The corkscrew trees. Trees like a giant's pliant cutlery.

Dad left from the house in Victoria. He packed two suitcases and asked a colleague to collect the remainder. He sent a telegram from Seattle. I remember the messenger's trousers were cuffed in mud. Our lawn in Victoria did not absorb water well. I watched the boy kick the stand of his bike and step into a

puddle. We rarely received telegrams to the house in those days. Even family sent mail to Dad's office. I remember the paper exactly—Western Union yellow. It smelled of envelope seals.

MORLEY WILL COME FOR REST

His last words to the family. I don't know what I expected.

Dad never said where he was going. I'd have gone to California if I was him. I used to visit his downtown office after school. He let me organize the brochures they collected from other ship companies. They always featured girls in the ads—women in swim costumes with bell-shaped bums. Women in rowboats, faces tipped to the sun, a woman in a Nile green bikini, her arm raised, a starfish slipping from her hand. I filed the brochures by destination—country first, if applicable, then state or province, then each city. On Santa Monica Beach, the girls linked hands in the surf. They leapt into the air with beach balls. They waved from their towels on the sand. On the street, buildings were sun-bleached with frilled Spanish windows. Palm trees lined the boulevards. The ocean was everywhere.

It felt funny to dream about this from an island, where the ocean was already everywhere. But Luke and I were the only ones you'd see in the surf. It was too cold for adults, unless the day was very warm. The trick was to dive under and swim until you needed to come up for air. By that time, you would be used to the temperature, or deep enough that you needed to tread water, which helped. Sometimes the cold took my breath away. I tested my new vocabulary, which Joan taught me.

Fuck, I would say, my lips blowing out the consonants.

Sonofawhore.

Most vessels in the water were fishing crafts. They passed between the islands in dinghies and canoes, or larger boats, the floats of gill nets trailing in their wake like a string of tin cans. On the brochures for Canada, men stood in the sun and rolled up their sleeves.

From my secret beach, I thought I saw a canoe. Its bow rose from the water at a lean angle, like the throat of an ascending goose. It appeared unmanned. A bird shrieked behind me, and I turned to find

seagulls jousting over a crab shell. By the time I looked back, the canoe was gone. The sun shone brightly away from the trees.

When I returned to the house for lunch, I found the terrace doors open. Mom and Eugene sat on opposite sides of the living room—Mom in the sunlight, on Dad’s driftwood rocking chair, Eugene on the loveseat near the kitchen. I stayed outside on the porch swing to arrange my flowers. Sometimes I wanted to snip their stems and suspend them in a jar like carp. Then all the flowers would match the trilliums, which were ground blooms. I had picked too many of those. They wouldn’t stand inside the vase.

They need you for a week? said Mom from inside.

I have a lot more to manage now.

Now?

Don’t play dim, Dolly.

Dim Dolly, she repeated. What do they call that?

Who’s they?

I don’t know. Poets. Don’t, dim, Dolly ...

Are you drunk?

Drunk dim Dolly ...

What’s in your glass?

Drrram ... buie, she said. Now that’s a nice word.

I sat on the swing with one foot on the ground so I could push myself. I snipped the vines of honeysuckle with scissors from my sewing tin. It served as half sewing tin, half first aid kit: moustache scissors, two needles, a spool of thread, band-aids.

I don’t even know if I should leave you alone with the kids.

Oh, Willa’s very good.

I’m serious.

Then don't go.

There was a pause.

I invited the boys up.

We just saw them.

I know. But I spoke to Eveline last week. Pat's up to no good.

So?

I've asked him to man the house for a few days. Teach him some responsibility.

Why didn't you tell me?

I'm telling you now.

Who's looking after who, then? Couldn't hire a nanny so you ask your son to spy?

No one's spying on anyone.

No? What's he done, anyhow.

I strained to listen. Would he be coming this week? Had he already left San Diego?

Oh, you know. Public drinking. One incident with a dog. Are those my cigarettes?

Yes. What happened to the dog?

Didn't the doctor say to ease off?

Probably.

He continued in a low voice. I leaned nearer to the door.

Kenneth can't come. He's working at the marina.

I didn't hear her response—something brushed my knee. I opened my eyes. Luke stood beside me on the terrace, his arms folded around his stamp album.

Willa, I'm hungry, he said.

Hush, I'm eavesdropping.

Can you make me tomato soup?

Not now. Mom and Eugene are talking.

I patted the swing seat beside me and he climbed onto the cushion. He fingered the flowers in the colander, his hand tracing the five fragile petals of the rose.

Careful, I said. Watch the thorns.

Why didn't you tell me earlier? said Mom.

It's not your decision. They're my sons.

It's my house.

You mean *his* house.

In the silence that followed, I worried she would hurl her glass at him. Instead she said, Where are the matches?

Eugene didn't respond.

She sighed loudly and creaked off the sofa.

Don't waste those long ones on cigarettes, said Eugene.

Her match wiped the strip; I heard it from outside.

After a moment, Eugene said, Maybe I'll take Luke with me.

Beside me, Luke stared at his knees. He clutched the hem of his white-and-blue conductor shorts, the rose stranded across his lap. I draped my arm over his shoulder and pulled him close to me.

Mom still hadn't responded. Or if she had, I could not hear her.

Luke dipped his head onto my shoulder. I tried to hold his hand, but he gripped his shorts too tightly. I had to pry his fingers one by one. That's when I saw the wet strawberry of blood smeared into his shorts. He flipped his hand and opened his fist. We both stared into his palm—he had to hold it as a cup so the blood didn't spill.

I cuffed the back of his head. —You touched the stem, I said.

He nodded, eyes still fastened to the blood.

I told you to be careful.

The crease of his palm provided a shallow channel. I cupped my hands under his. Inside, I couldn't hear their voices anymore.

Come on, you ape.

We lurched off the swing like conjoined twins, my hands clasped around his palms as though we carried an egg. We hobbled inside through the kitchen doors to avoid Mom and Eugene, who still sat in the living room, though they were quiet now, their mouths wooden and still, bodies reclined on their doll's chairs. A drip spilled into my hand, perhaps because we were running, or trying to run, our shoulders twisted toward each other, away from our hips. We reached the bathroom and tipped Luke's hands into the sink. There was not as much blood as I thought. But his skin was hot with it. I ran warm water from the faucet and yanked a ribbon of toilet paper from the roll.

Hold this, I said. I crammed the wad into his palm. —Then I'll give you a band-aid.

I decided we should cycle into Ganges for ice cream because I didn't like tomato soup, and Eugene had opened a bottle of Cointreau, which meant they would smoke in stiff silence until they ran out of ice and Mom offered to walk to the neighbours'. Probably he would not leave today. Probably he would leave tomorrow, when his eyes ached and Mom refused to fry him eggs.

We bandaged Luke's cut and I wrapped his hand with a clean rag so he did not feel it on the handlebars. It was forty minutes to town—fifty with Luke, as his legs weren't long enough to pedal fast. I used Joan's bike, he used my old one. It was large for him—the wheels as tall as his hips. He looked like a cricket.

We rode down North End Road, between columns of trees that separated the road from farmland. Sun filled the leaves—the arbutus trunks plump with it, a warm gauze of light thickening the air between their boughs and the boughs of fir trees. There is a pigment where green becomes gold, I think. You see it in apples. And the gaps between branches. Between the branches, we saw brassy meadows and a pear orchard. The pears wouldn't ripen until August, but already I smelled the hard green of new fruit. We

passed the schoolhouse, then the northeast lobe of St. Mary's Lake. Luke asked to go in. You could jump from the road, if you minded the nettles. I told him to wait until we bought ice cream.

My den chief said not to eat and swim.

I ignored him. I thought about how this island was the most beautiful in the world. More beautiful than California. Palm trees were unfriendly—their fronds like thin spears or paddle blades. I didn't like avocados much either. I'd rather eat a pear from the orchard, or a sweet, crisp apple.

What's your favourite ice cream? he asked.

I shrugged. The sun glanced off the lake and filled my eyes.

I like chocolate peppermint, he said.

I was not sure which I liked. I liked to say the words "burgundy cherry," and I liked how Mrs. Lee used whole cherries, which I tugged from the cream with my teeth.

Frozen custard with cherry, I said.

The sea smelled different at Ganges. The seagull shit and salt off the docks smelled pleasant, somehow. Organic like dead crabs. The scent mingled with vinegar from the chip shop, and waffle cones, boat bilge, the musk of warm ropes.

We ordered from the soda counter at the drugstore. I chose cherry. Luke asked for fudge. We stood outside the shop in the sunshine. The road was not gravel here, but warm and silty, like flour between our toes. We sat on the curb and tried to lick our ice cream faster than it melted over the lip of the cone. The boy who delivered for the creamery had parked his wagon in the middle of the road. I recognized him. I think he brought our milk last summer. As he heaved a can off the cart, the sun lit the hairs that dusted his forearms. He didn't look at me or Luke. Maybe we were too young for him to see. He was older than Joan, I thought. Eighteen. His shirt striped white and red like a boiled mint. His tan reminded me of the brothers, but his skin tone looked more honest somehow, from hefting crates and chopping wood rather than surfing. When he bent to lift two more cans, the muscles in his forearms purred. I looked away as our eyes met. Blood flushed my cheeks. I felt embarrassed by my bare feet.

Willa, said Luke.

What.

Your ice cream.

I looked to find it had melted down my wrist. A milky drip of it, drying into a band of taut skin.

Can we go now? he asked. The boy had passed us into the drugstore. Luke stood and petted his horse. The animal huffed and several flies sneezed from his nose. I stood as well and walked to the rear of the cart, where a blanket screened the bottles from dust. I lifted a corner of the blanket. Underneath, the boy had arranged the glass by size into rows: tall bottles for milk and squatter vessels for cream that cinched at the centre like hourglasses. I reached inside and freed a jar of cream. I tucked it inside my shirt.

We cycled back toward the lake. I pushed the jar of cream inside my waistband. If Luke saw the bulge, he didn't mention it. We pedalled up the first hill, and I focused all energy into my torso—into clenching my navel, as though my solidity would stop the jar from falling. We tipped over the hill and coasted down. I placed one hand over my stomach. The glass warmed against my skin.

Luke didn't ask to swim, though I knew he wanted to. I felt bad, because I'd said we would stop, but I wanted to go home. I wanted to hide this cream under my bed, then tiptoe along the trunk of my arbutus tree and think about the boy who drove the dairy cart. We lived so far up the island. I wondered if he still delivered our milk. For the first time, I felt glad that Joan wasn't there. They loved her so effortlessly, boys.

Luke's gaze hung on the lake, which glittered beyond the horsetails and spirals of blackberry. I nearly braked, but pretended I forgot my promise instead. The water glinted sharply—at that moment, it seemed a lake reflected more light than the sea. The ocean absorbed light, held the sun. A lake spat the sun at you.

It took an hour to reach home because I rode one-handed, cradling the jar of cream against my belly button. Luke didn't say anything as we arrived. He walked his bike to the garden shed and slotted it

neatly beside the skiff. I slid my bike next to his. On his way out, he unwound the rag from his hand and folded it inside his pocket. Chocolate had dried into the corners of his mouth. He continued outside and crossed the grass, pausing on the porch to collect his stamp album. I followed him inside. Eugene had driven to the neighbours' for ice. Mom sat on the chair with an empty glass between her palms. Her lips were parted around a wedge of lemon.

The morning after Mom and Eugene made up, the kitchen: green stubbies like Japanese fish floats, Cointreau, a reedy bottle of cognac. Gorged lemons on the butcher block. Sprigs of mint. Eugene had pestled the mint into the block, its dye filling the knife cuts. The counters looked like the beach after one of their parties. Except no one drank Cointreau at beach parties, I didn't think. No one mooched over the logs with orange-lighted martinis, limp coils of rind over their glass. I noticed traces of food too, which surprised me. They often forgot their hunger when they drank, or they squeezed enough citrus fruit into glasses to fool their stomachs. But I saw a briny, pearl-sized caper in the sink, and in the fridge I found a chicken breast so thin they must have pummelled it with the pestle too. It sat under an oily relish of tomato and onion. No one had touched it. I wondered if Eugene cooked in the night, then passed out. They rarely prepared enough for leftovers.

I sensed Luke was gone before I came downstairs. His door was shut, and I couldn't hear him snore. I knew the sound of his sleep: the depth of his breath, the film of snot that flickered in his nose. His Buster Browns were gone from the front door, and I couldn't find his cowboy hat. He wore his cowboy hat every time he took the ferry. In the jetsam of the kitchen counter, I spotted toast crumbs, cereal milk, an empty glass clouded with pulp. Mom would be sleeping, but I decided to check on her. Her room was normally off limits. I slinked down the hall and turned the knob—held it with my palm, so the click would not wake her. I slipped inside and guided the knob's release.

My mother basked in the centre of her bed. Her limbs soaked the watery light from the window—Eugene had opened the curtain, I guessed, in an effort to wake her. Or neither of them had shut the curtain the night before. Light can make someone so beautiful and so ugly. I didn't know that then. I hadn't seen my reflection in harsh light—my eye sockets illuminated, oily forehead, backlit pores. And when I stared at my mother, I did not catch how the sun matted the creases under her eyes and warmed her hair into wisps of nutmeg, and smoothed her cheekbones, so she did not look too thin, but fashionable, and her

arms were not liverish and stringy, but gold and tautly wound. The sun filled her with a warmth that was not her own, but no less inviting. I lay next to her and absorbed the heat from her limbs, the light from the window, and tried to slip into the same dozy dream.

After a time, my stomach croaked. I slipped back into the hall. I was hungry. Part of me wanted to get hungrier. To let my stomach open inside my gut, the membrane trembling into void space until I started to float. I borrowed my mother's canvas shoes from the front door and walked to the road.

It was Sunday, I remembered, when I saw the ladies in their church hats. Every week, Pamela Rice drove her husband's Plymouth to collect her friends on the North End. Their husbands attended too, of course, but they took Mr. Tobin's Cadillac. They had fun this way—girls and boys separated, as in school. The church was in Ganges, and Pamela Rice could walk. She offered to drive, I think, so she could show off her town car. Custard yellow, glazed as a doughnut. She looked coated in sugar herself. She wore a front-button dress with cap sleeves, a beaded hat and round, white-framed sunglasses. They had parked outside the Tobins' farm. Wanda O'Reilly picked her path down the drive with Mr. Tobin's wife, Mariko. Not many Japanese had returned to the island yet. Even then, I could tell Mariko was different from those who did. She'd married an advertiser from Toronto, who drove that Cadillac. She wore day suits and called herself Ko-Ko.

These were my mother's friends. Before Dad left, we attended church with them. Now she slept in on Sundays. I kept waiting for someone to notice and collect me or Luke. No one did. Mom still invited the ladies for tea every week. They sat on the terrace and talked about their husbands.

I stepped off the road to let the Plymouth pass. Wanda sat in the back seat and fluttered her sherbet fingernails. They had rolled down the roof. Her scarf whistled behind her in a slash of pink.

I continued up the road to the path that led to my secret beach. It was overgrown with blackberry, but I knew the opening and could get through without scratches. There was a way you could train your body to weave through underbrush—to skip over nettles and dodge errant fistfuls of thorns. I had spent most of my summers here, and every June my memory of the paths returned like a mother tongue. The

brush may have thickened, a tree struck down, but I still knew where to swipe my hips or duck a low branch. That's why the sight in the tree alarmed me. It was in one of the cedars rotting from the inside out. Joan and I hid here sometimes, the rusty mulch peeling into our hair. We couldn't fit now, of course. Maybe Luke could. I had passed the tree the day before on my way to the beach. Now, strung to the trunk by kitchen twine, its neck opened, the fur of its chest unlaced, a small animal hung in the gap. And below, in the trunk's cavernous gut, a rabbit's head.

It was a wild rabbit, lean from its fast heart and a lifetime of running. I felt surprised by the pigment of its lining. The fabric fell from its throat a beating red. It did not seem we could hide such colour under our skin, but I recognized it. I couldn't think where until I peered inside the opening. I had seen this red inside my sister. Once, she had turned the lights on after Mom said goodnight, then sat across from me on the mattress. She slipped her underwear to one ankle and unpeeled her knees. Her groin was hot with thrush. We didn't know the name for it then. Her vulva gaped like the beak of an infant bird. Joan saw me hold my breath. I didn't know what to say. She thumped her hips on the bed and jabbed her crotch with her fist.

I felt a similar helplessness now. Who would have killed the rabbit? If they hunted the rabbit for food, why did they leave it? I stepped back and glanced over my shoulder. I needed to see every angle at once. If someone in this forest beheaded rabbits for fun, I did not want to meet them. I ran through the salal toward the shore. A few yards from the bottom, my foot caught on the root of a tree or a rock, and I toppled onto my chest. I lay there a moment, my head inches from the beach stones, my knees and palms stinging. Then I heard something behind me—a sweeping through brush. Hair caught on bark. I don't know how, but I heard a girl's hair. I froze, my belly sunk in green tangles. An arm of salal had snapped and needled my hip. I felt too scared to turn and too scared to keep my back to them. I sat up all at once—a clumsy torquing movement that skinned my knees.

Luke? I said, though I knew he was in Victoria.

I examined each branch, as though if I stared hard enough, the trunk would bend to reveal who stood behind it. —This isn't funny come out right now.

I looked over my shoulder again. My arbutus tree stretched from the bank. I eased onto my palms and knees and stood. That's when I saw what tripped me. Slugged in the salal, moss and branches uprooted by its gunwales, lay a canoe. I turned again.

Hello?

Then I bolted. I worried my knees would buckle before I reached the road. I clambered onto the gravel and spun around to scan the woods. I could only see the path I had torn behind me, the moss and loose earth turned under my shoes.

I arrived home to find the dairy cart parked outside our house. The horse stood in the tree shadow and huffed pollen from his nose. My breath quickened. No one delivered milk on Sundays. I stepped onto the terrace and peeked through the windows. I couldn't see anyone in the living room, but a record revolved on the turntable. When I opened the door, a loamy voice hummed from the speaker. *There is a balm in Gilead.*

My mother stood in the kitchen with an ice tray. She had fastened the hair from her forehead with a plastic comb. Her kimono fell open around her waist. She wore a slip. —Hi, Duck, she said as she twisted the tray. She unbuckled two cubes from the plastic and carried them in her palm to the counter. —One or two? she asked.

None, a man's voice answered. The dairy boy stood behind me in the doorway, his hair folded over his forehead like a conch.

I looked to my mother. She stood at the other counter now with the ice cubes in her fist. A bead of water rolled down her forearm.

Darling, this is Roy.

She dropped both cubes into her glass and reached for me. Water seeped from her palm into the sleeve of my sundress. I waited until she lifted her hand, then rolled the damp sleeve up my shoulder.

He gave Patrick a lift from the ferry.

Patrick's here *now*?

He's staying for a few days while Eugene's away.

Why?

He's had a long journey. Why don't you bring him a glass of milk?

She opened the fridge, her kimono sash dragging under the heel. It hung by only one of the belt loops.

The dairy boy shifted his eyes to the counter, where a pulpy fistful of rind had been disgorged from the sink.

You should throw fruit peel in the trash, he said. I had to stick a coat hanger down there.

Yes, you've been a godsend this morning, said Mom. What with Eugene gone.

I felt embarrassed she hadn't cleaned—olive pits and used lemons still scattered the counters.

She withdrew a bottle of Campari from the icebox, forgetting the milk. She poured the liquid into two glasses and filled them with soda.

So where is he?

Outside. They arrived a couple hours ago while I was dead asleep. Eugene didn't tell me they would be here so early! She paused to shake her head, mouth smeared into a smile. —So Roy showed him around the island—didn't you? Then brought his suitcase back.

She passed the dairy boy his glass.

He raised it to me. —He wanted to go for a dip.

I imagined him swimming where he liked. Pissing in tide pools. No one asked me how *I* felt about him coming. Yet a dark sliver of me wanted to see him. I ignored that feeling, the ripple of excitement,

and focused on the dairy boy, who had miraculously appeared in my kitchen. He was beautiful, like the brothers. His neck slender but hard as clay.

Can I try? I asked, reaching for Mom's glass.

You won't like it, she said, but slid her drink along the counter. To prove her wrong, I tipped the glass into my mouth and sipped long from it. The liquid prickled my throat, then rose again as bile. It tasted like dandelion. Even still, I wanted my own.

Mom reached for me and stroked my hair. —It's prettier than it tastes, she said.

I set the glass on the counter and tried to smack the flavour from my tongue.

The dairy boy watched my expression as he sipped his own drink. He wiped his mouth. My own hand lifted and copied him.

I'm planning a party, Mom said.

Why?

A summer party, she said, as if that explained it.

Without Eugene?

She smiled without showing her teeth. —Of course Eugene's invited. Have you seen Roy's horse?

He looked thirsty.

Roy glanced at me but didn't move.

Would you like a pail for water? I asked.

Why don't you do that for him, said Mom.

My feet stayed planted. —Can you make me a butter sandwich?

Willa, she said. Isn't that something you can fix yourself?

In my bedroom, I checked my mattress for the vessel of cream. It remained where I'd left it, wedged between two boards of the bed frame. I lifted the jar. The mattress snapped back. I sat on the bed and unscrewed the brass lid. The cream smelled of butterfat. I dipped my pinky, the liquid coating my nail. I

licked it off and dipped deeper, until cream filled the space between my fingers. Then I submerged my entire hand. To pry it free, I had to close my fingers like a beak. Cream spattered the bedsheet, the lap of my sundress. I licked a drop from my palm. I opened my legs and rubbed cream into the strips of my thighs.

I wanted to return to the woods and examine the dead rabbit. I thought I might find a clue. Did they use a flat or serrated knife, for example. Could I learn clues from the wound, the fray of its skin? Maybe they left something behind. The spool of yarn. A matchstick. The print of their shoe. The dairy boy would protect me if he came along.

The skin of my palm had dried tacky. I padded downstairs to the lower washroom and rinsed my hands under the faucet. I could hear Mom's voice on the terrace and followed it down the hall. Dad's chair sat in the middle of the living room. I didn't like the look of the driftwood when no one sat in it—the brittle fingers of twigs and dead branches. It looked like a rib cage. A vacant torso. Mom and Roy perched on either side of the outside table, their thighs crossed and threadlike, glasses half-filled with pink soda. Mom leaned over the table and wiped the bow of Roy's chin. Didn't he go to church? I wondered then. Why was he free on Sunday anyhow?

Neither of them noticed me in the rocking chair. On the record player, the needle had released and drifted back to the edge. I wondered if I should flip the record over. Outside, Roy drained the rest of his drink. He stood up and extended his hand. Mom stayed seated in her metal chair. She shaded her hand over her eyes, then reached her other hand to meet his. She rested her fingers limply on his palm, as though waiting for him to bow and kiss. He stepped away from her. Her hand hung in the air. He saluted two fingers to his temple and jogged down the steps to the garden. She swirled the rashy liquid in her glass and emptied it into her mouth.

She didn't see me as she stepped back inside. She tripped on a fold of the drape and swore. She stalked past my chair, rubbing sleep from her eye with the same hand that gripped her glass.

I waited until I heard her feet on the stairs, then I ran outside to cut off Roy. He had reached the horse by the time I found him. He was pouring a stream of water into the horse's jaw with a bucket from the well. The horse gnawed at it. His teeth mashed the air. Then he plunged his head and the water trilled down the channel of his nose.

Hey, I said.

Roy lifted the arm that held the bucket, startled. He looked at me under his bicep, then beyond me, as if he expected to find my mother in the window or watching from behind the trunk of a tree. Meanwhile, water coursed over the horse's eyelids. It wept down the seam of its jaw. When Roy realized his horse had stopped drinking, he jerked the pail back.

I wiped the horse's eyelashes and collected the moisture on my finger. The water beaded into a skin-coloured wart. I wanted to tell Roy about the rabbit, but I didn't know how to start.

Do you have anything to eat? I said.

He reached into his canvas bag and pulled out a tin of saltines. I took one and held it in my palm. I didn't actually want it.

You go to school? he said.

Sure. In Victoria.

He replaced the lid on his tin and tossed it back in the cart.

Do you want to see something? I said.

He was looking at me but not looking at me. —What is it?

I'll show you.

Is it far?

No. Just down the road.

He climbed into the cart. He sat for a moment, as if considering whether he should leave. Finally, he gestured to the milk can beside him. The passenger seat.

Do *you* go to school? I asked as I climbed aboard and shifted on the milk can to arrange my tailbone.

No.

He snapped the reins and we lurched down the drive toward the road. He sat with his legs open like a cowboy. I wondered if he was a cowboy. He didn't look like the milkmen in Victoria. They wore leather-billed hats and white coats.

Are you a cowboy?

No.

Do you know Roy Rogers?

Never owned a TV.

I listen to his show on the radio, I said.

We parked the wagon where I said, and I led the way along the path through wheels of salal toward the tree. Roy's boots thudded behind me—I wasn't used to hearing such loud footsteps. When Luke and I explored the woods, he glided over the ground lighter than I did. I had taught him how to run like deer—how to spring away from the earth rather than thump into it. Listening to Roy, I couldn't help but stop to survey his damage. He had trampled a fern. His boots kicked up moss.

Is it close? he asked, when he saw me pause.

Getting there, I said. A fern frond nodded into the dirt. I knelt to lift its spine.

He stared at me. I self-consciously stood again. I walked slower this time. I was beginning to question whether this was a good idea. Roy felt like an intruder now. Like Patrick. He didn't even know to avoid the moss. I could see the tree trunk ahead of us—the side with the bark still intact. I wondered briefly whether I should skirt it—pretend we had taken a wrong path somewhere. Apologize and suggest we head back. But my eyes had already started surveying the ground for clues. We had come so close.

It's there, I said.

I picked my way over the system of tree roots. Roy stamped after me. But when I reached the opening of the tree, the rabbit was gone. The kitchen twine hung from the bark like a bloodied yo-yo string. Not even the head remained.

I don't understand, I said.

Roy stepped behind me. I could feel his body heat.

There was a carcass on that string.

What?

A dead rabbit.

I waded through brush to where I had found the canoe. I stepped carefully down the hill, too distracted now to explain. It had been right there. I could see the canoe's imprint—the snapped arms of salal and dented moss.

What are you looking for? he said.

I scanned every direction, searching for dead wood, a corner of the keel. I knelt and roamed my hands over the broken branches. Then I felt something soft. Folded in a socket of salal brush was a flap of cotton. The branches had been bent into a nest. When I tugged the flap, it turned into a mud-stained, flaccid elephant, sewn from a tea towel. Beside the elephant, in the same pocket of leaves, someone had wedged a metal comb.

I tucked the animal back where I found it. Only a child would take such care—to fold her doll inside a wreath of leaves. Only a girl. Instead of returning the comb, I slipped it inside the length of my knee sock. I didn't want to question later whether this was a dream. In its place, I removed the plastic barrette from my hair. I inserted it in the branches between the elephant's arms. That seemed a fair trade, I thought. It was a yellow barrette. I had borrowed it from my sister.

Find something? said Roy.

No. What I saw is gone.

I brushed the burrs from my dress and stood up. Roy stretched his hand toward me. I let him help me over the thicket.

The gaps between the comb's teeth were plugged with film from somebody's scalp. I freed a smear with my thumb. A hair loosened with it—a black thread shorter than my own. It stretched to the end of my chin. I sat at the mirror and combed my hair until a metal tooth snapped. I hadn't brushed that morning. My waves congealed under the top layer into one mat. I'd always wanted my hair to be anemic blond or black as coffee. I liked extremes. I thought beauty might exist in superlatives. The tallest and longest. The whitest and blackest. The roundest. The softest. The most blue. In the books I read, plain girls described their hair as "mousy." I hoped my hair was not mousy. If a book described my hair, I'd like them to say wolf-like.

He appeared in the mirror first—leaning into my doorway, hand in the pocket of his jean shorts, feet bare. I noticed his shins were smoother than mine, though he was fourteen now. Boys at school had started to grow hair on their legs, under their arms. Above the collar of his shirt, his throat dipped into a nose-sized hollow.

I turned from the mirror and involuntarily glanced at his shorts. When I realized it, I darted my eyes away.

How long have you been skulking around? I said.

Arrived this morning.

Your hair's not wet.

So?

Roy said you went for a swim.

It dried.

We fell into a mutual silence. He waited for me to invite him in, and I waited for him to leave me alone. Downstairs, Mom opened and slammed drawers in the kitchen. The sounds echoed upstairs, spoons and forks rattling in their tray.

I don't have to play with you if I don't want to, I said.

He smirked. I regretted the word "play."

He stalked into my room and sat on my bed. His back crushed the pillows I had beat that morning. He lifted his hip to remove a paperback from his pocket and started to read.

What'd you do, anyhow? To get sent here.

He continued to read. He didn't look at me once. He read every word, or counted the seconds it would take to read every word. I watched him—first because I expected him to answer, then because I had been watching him so long, the moment had passed where I could ask him to leave or leave the room myself. After a hundred and seventy seconds, he shifted his backside on the bed, as if unable to get comfortable.

There's something wrong with your mattress.

What?

He bounced up and down, the frame creaking under his weight. —I feel something.

A sweat wicked my neck. How could he feel the jar, when I couldn't?

Just a bit lumpy. Stop it. You'll break my bed.

He smiled at me a moment, as if he knew I was lying. Then he snapped his book shut and swung his feet to the floor.

Forget it. I have to take a dump. He walked to the door, then turned, running his eyes down my waist to my pelvis.

My cheeks flushed and I pushed past him into the hall. He followed, closing the door behind him, but I didn't look back, I ran down the stairs, vibrating with frustration. I breathed in, pressed my eyelids closed. When my heart stopped pounding, I smoothed the lap of my dress. I walked into the kitchen with my fists clenched.

Mom bent over the counter, slicing a cucumber so thin the discs folded over the knife. She still wore her kimono, though she had applied lipstick. A hook of pink the colour of her Campari.

There you are, she said. She had traced blue pencil along the bottom ledge of her eyelashes. It made her irises purple.

I was starving. I still had Roy's saltine in my pocket. —What are you making?

A face mask.

Oh.

Would you like one?

I'm hungry.

She plugged the new Osterizer into the wall. She had ordered it from an appliance catalogue in Vancouver.

I found a loaf in the breadbox and lined two slices on a plate. —You want some? I asked, pushing Patrick out of my mind, returning my thoughts to the dairy boy.

I've eaten, she said. I scrambled myself an egg.

If my mother cooked for herself, she only scrambled one egg. In a fingernail of butter, with parsley from the garden. Dad used to nag her—*one* egg. Who scrambles *one* egg. I carved the crusts off my bread and left them on the butcher block, because I knew sometimes she liked to eat them when no one watched. She worked beside me, sliding her cucumber into the Osterizer, leaving six discs for me on the counter.

Thank you, I said. I spread cream cheese onto my bread. We still had a container of it from when Pamela Rice made icing for carrot cake. —Will you really throw a party?

Why not? she said. Wanda's thrown two parties in the last month. I missed both of them.

So?

She didn't answer me.

Does Roy go to church?

She spooned honey into the blender and used her finger to scrape it off the spoon. An amber balloon drooped off her nail.

I don't know, Duck. She licked her finger. —That's not your business.

Is it your business? I asked.

She bit down and scraped the nail between her teeth. —Don't be cheeky. She walked to the tap and rinsed her hands.

I arranged the cucumber petals into a flower.

She poured milk into the blender, sealed the lid and pressed start. The motor wailed. The blades sounded like they were grinding metal spoons. After a few pulses, she twisted the jar off the base. She pried off the lid and gave the wet pulp a slosh.

I made enough for two, she said. Sit outside with me. It won't keep.

I sliced my sandwich into fingers and followed her onto the terrace.

We sat on the canvas cushions of the porch swing. She turned me so that I faced her, my heels tucked under my thighs. She sat with one leg folded, the other stretched to the ground to catch the sun. I placed my plate on my lap.

Lean your head back, she said.

I couldn't help but wonder if Patrick was watching from some window. If he was listening to us. But I did as she said and shut my eyes. She spooned cucumber slush onto my cheeks, pushed back my hair, painted my forehead.

Willa, she said. She paused. —Charles slides down the banister and feels pleasure. If he climbs the stairs and slides again, does he sin?

I had no idea what she was talking about. The only Charles I knew was two grades younger than me and smelled of spinach.

Natalie rides her bicycle and feels pleasure, she said. She keeps riding. Does she sin?

My mouth felt dry. I tried to swallow but couldn't move the saliva with my neck hinged back. I think I knew what she was hinting at—and for the second time, thought of Patrick. But it's not like Mom went to church. Isn't *that* a sin? Still, my cheeks warmed. I hoped the cucumber disguised it.

Maybe you should spend time with your sister this month.

I pushed her hand away and sat up.

Would you like that, Ducky? You could stay with her and Linda.

I hate Linda.

Don't be rude.

It's not rude. It's honest. I hate Patrick too.

She smiled and tipped my chin farther back. —Eventually, you'll learn when to be honest. She massaged cucumber under the bone of my jaw. —Your sister should be your role model.

I didn't understand. She told Eugene she wanted to keep me here, and now she wanted me to leave. My brow knotted as I worked this through, and the mask lumped.

She guided my head to rest against the swing. My stomach growled.

Cucumber really hydrates the skin, she said.

I closed my eyes and traced the edge of the sandwich bread with my finger. The swing creaked as her weight shifted. I opened my eye long enough to watch her massage the mask into her cheekbones.

See? She smiled at me. —Isn't this fun?

There were fewer mirrors at the beach house. That was something I always noticed. You became used to finding yourself on walls. The house on Salt Spring had belonged more to my dad, who furnished it with driftwood. Mom focused her energy in Victoria. Our velveteen parlour with pear-green chairs and man-eating drapes. She hung mirrors in every room. To make the most of the space, she would say. I liked them because they invited more bodies into the house. Our family doubled in size. Of course she decorated the beach cottage too. She brought the patio furniture and the striped sofa. But it would be trickier to pack panels of glass on the ferry. We had a mirror in the bathroom and one full-length in my mother's closet. But not in my room. So if I wanted to see myself, I had to lock the bathroom door and sit on the sink with my feet in the basin. It wasn't vanity as much as a game where I observed what parts of

my body had changed. Eye colour, for instance. Today, could I see the ring of yellow around my pupils? How white were my teeth? Should I brush harder? Had the sunburn on my nose begun to peel? Of course I checked on other changes too. The hair under my arms. The flesh there. My breasts had spread in that direction—toward my armpits rather than each other. Not that I cared about cleavage. I didn't want to wear a bra.

Patrick's presence made me wonder where I stood in the family. People applied different words to Joan than they applied to me. They described her as a "heartbreaker." My mother's friends call me "sly."

I asked Joan what she thought once. She read a lot of magazines, and that made her an authority, I guess.

Say, what do you think of my looks, generally? I'd said.

She raised her eyes from her catalogue and answered so smoothly, I wondered if this was something she thought about. —You're owlsh. Your eyes are too big, but I think you'll fill out.

Oh.

She leaned toward me, as if to kiss me on the cheek, then ruffled her hand through my bangs. —You're better off not thinking about it.

I had never asked my mother, but the next night she commented on it without my prompting. She and Joan had been at it. I don't remember why, now. It could've been anything. Every now and then Mom surfaced to say something sweet or mean to us. More often, she directed her comment to Joan, and more often, it was mean. She said things like, "I once saw a skirt *just like that*, on a whore in Vancouver." Or, "You'd be a lovely creature if only you fixed your teeth." Often Joan would retaliate. She'd say everyone knew Mom was a lush, she embarrassed the whole family, poor Eugene, what a banshee he'd ended up with. And Mom would tell her to get out, and Joan would go to Linda's.

So Joan had gone to Linda's. Eugene had taken the neighbour's dog for a walk with Luke. We sat alone in our kitchen in Victoria. It was dusk by then. Neither of us had closed the windows, as if to dispel

the tension from their fight. The night smelled of the community pool and lawn clippings, as well as the cut lime and quinine from her drink.

Willa, she said as she wiped the sweat off her glass and touched her temple. —It doesn't do you any favour to be beautiful yet.

I looked up from my notebook. I had been memorizing passé composé “to be” verbs.

The most beautiful women were ugly girls, she said.

What?

It goes to your head otherwise.

She squeezed the smile of lime into her tumbler.

Why are you telling me this?

You're a changeling. Consider yourself “bookish” for now.

Okay, I said, though I didn't understand what she meant by “changeling.” I looked to her face for clues, but she appeared distracted by the lime, which she rotated in her hand.

You were always the better reader, she said. She tossed the lime over the counter into the kitchen sink. I started at the suddenness of the gesture. She wiped her palm on the tablecloth, as if to signal the end of our chat.

Since then, I sought myself in the mirror more often. What was the difference between me and Joan, anyhow? What made her beautiful and me bookish, or owlsh, or sly? I thought I might try to be more sly. If I were not beautiful, I could be a changeling, as my mother said. I guessed it meant someone who shifted shapes. I had always admired the insects I mistook for leaves. I wanted to emulate them. I wanted to emulate the reptiles in hotter countries. The side-winding adder with scales like grains of sand. The pygmy seahorse, studded with coral tubercles. And chameleons, of course.

After Mom and I talked, I looked up “changeling” in my dad's Oxford dictionary. Here is what I found:

1. *One given to change; a fickle or inconstant person; a waverer, turncoat, renegade.*
2. *A person or thing (surreptitiously) put in exchange for another.*
3. *A child secretly substituted for another in infancy; esp. a child (usually stupid or ugly)*

supposed to have been left by fairies in exchange for one stolen.

I liked that they put “surreptitiously” in brackets. Possibly I was a waverer, turncoat, renegade. The last one made me think. I thought back to this definition the morning after the face masks. That day was a day for being sly—for avoiding Patrick and finding whoever lived in the woods, to see if the barrette was still there. Maybe I would leave something new as a peace symbol. A jar of water, perhaps, in case they were thirsty. A sandwich—I could make a mean grilled cheese. I wondered how I could be *more* sly. I already stepped lightly. Perhaps I could wear more earth tones. I had a brown housedress. It was a shapeless cotton thing—Joan said it looked like an onion sack. But today was not a day to be beautiful. I was a side-winding adder with scales like tree bark. A seahorse the colour of yellow cedar.

In the kitchen, I filled a mason jar with cold water and buttered two slices of sandwich bread. Patrick hadn’t emerged from the guest bedroom yet, though it was eleven. I hoped to leave before he got up. My mother sat at the table in her kimono. She was smoking her morning cigarette and sipping coffee I knew had gone cold by then.

Lunch already? she said.

I heated a pan on the stove while I sliced the cheddar we kept in our fridge. I never saw anyone eat the cheese, but we always had a block on the butter shelf. Maybe Eugene ate it (surreptitiously) before supper.

I wouldn’t make a habit of eating between meals, Mom said.

It was difficult to feel scared under such a pregnant sky. The sun warmed the top of my head like hot yolk. It made me think of that game we played at school, where someone cracks their fists over your head. *Dot dot, line line, spider crawling up your spine*, they say, running their fingers up your neck. *Tight squeeze*,

cool breeze, blowing on your nape, *now you've got the shiveries*. That's when they crack the egg, and the yolk drips behind your ears. I thought about what Mom said about pleasure and sinning. I'd felt pleasure when they cracked the egg.

I located my cavernous tree trunk and worked my way back to where the canoe had been buried. I couldn't see it. Maybe the barrette had scared her off and she found another cove. After a few minutes, I found the elephant doll tangled in the same thicket of leaves. I unpeeled the leaves and searched the hollow between the elephant's legs, and below it in the scrub of branches. The barrette was gone. I looked around for other traces: trampled moss, grass broken back. I could see nothing. I left the jar of water and the grilled cheese, which I had folded in wax paper. The tide was out. I could walk to the end of my horizontal arbutus tree and jump to the rocks. The rocks opened into green sinks of tide pools. I liked to gaze into them and feed blackberries to the starfish. Today, I picked my way over the pools to the end of the point. This gave me a wide view of the sea between the islands, but the water glinted and I found it difficult to see. That's when the canoe glided past the rocks, its bow like the throat of a goose. A small girl knelt in the hull. She wore a cream dress, her hair clipped to her ears. Her cheek turned as the canoe drifted behind the rock. I caught a band of yellow in her hair—not a trick of light, I didn't think, but my sister's barrette pinning her bangs. The canoe slipped from sight. I wondered if I'd imagined the whole thing.

When I returned home, I saw another strange sight. Patrick was lying on the living room floor, and my mother stood on his back. She kneaded the ball of her foot into one of his shoulder blades, the hem of her kimono grazing the dimples behind her knees. Patrick's arms rested at right angles to his head, his chin and neck extended on the carpet. I froze in the doorway. He didn't wear a shirt, his back marbled from my mother's heels. She shifted her weight and raised her other foot. I expected her to keep lifting, Patrick in her talons like a limp trout.

I waited for them to see me. His face pressed into the rug; I couldn't see his expression. Had he complained of backache? It wouldn't be the first time my mother boasted her talent for massage. She massaged guests at parties if she was drunk enough. But alone? With Patrick? Did he ask?

They'll bring wine, said my mother. All we need is one or two bottles of tequila.

She lowered her foot and paddled both heels into his sacrum. I missed the moment where I should have cleared my throat.

Patrick's eyes strayed across the room to the French doors. I followed his gaze, then found it mirrored back at me. I nearly gasped. He didn't say a word. Mother talked about canapés.

We'll get prosciutto, she said. We have a cantaloupe in the fruit bowl.

An energy passed between me and Patrick. At first, we only met in windows and pools of water.

Outside, the hand-dug well. I leaned over the shaft and found black water, the bricks fleeced with algae. At the bottom of the basin, a finger of sun broke and turned. I did not see his face in the well. I saw it when I raised the bucket. In light, the water was clear and smelled of cedar. I saw my hand reflected first: the bones of my knuckle as I dipped my palm for a drink. I saw my mouth in the pail and the water that dripped off my chin. His reflection replaced mine as I straightened. I released the chain with a start and it dropped into the shaft. Patrick said he did not mean to scare me. I said he didn't. He said, Want to ask Roy if we can ride his horse?

Okay.

I can show you the wasp nest.

Okay.

He's not here yet. He's in Ganges.

Okay.

Is that all you say?

Yes. I mean no. I wondered if Roy felt pleasure when he rode a horse.

Later, the drugstore at Ganges. My face in the glass, pale as a sand dollar. The pharmacist wore a white coat. A woman stood at the counter. She had packed her motherly hips into a brown skirt that was tight for her. I could tell she was a kind woman. I could hug her without getting poked by her ribs. The pharmacist entered his room where he cut powders and pills. Behind the till, amber vials lined the shelf. The woman tried on sunglasses while she waited. No one stood at the soda counter. I could imagine the shop filled with girls like Joan, with yellow hair and side parts, or chubby-kneed children sucking malts through a straw. Roy had parked his wagon outside. He must have been in the back of the shop, delivering canisters of cream for Mrs. Lee. She made the ice cream herself—yellow barrels of butter pecan, which she wheeled out for church picnics. The pharmacist returned to the counter with a paper bag. The woman

paid and walked out of the shop. I noticed she was still wearing the sunglasses. A voice asked if I had cycled all the way here. He stood behind me in the window. I hadn't heard him approach. His arms were tanned and did not reflect as brightly as my face.

Yes, I said.

Why didn't you tell me?

I don't know.

Roy's going back that way. He can give us a lift.

You already saw him?

We can throw your bike in the back

After he gave us a ride, Mom made him an omelette. The kitchen smelled sweaty with burnt onions. Mom and Roy sat outside and slapped mosquitoes from each other's necks. I watched them through my mother's compact. Most of the powder had chipped away, but the mirror was a nice size. I could observe people while I fixed my face. Roy split the omelette with his fork and scooped a bite into his mouth. Mother chewed her mouthful and sat back. She patted her lip with her napkin. He did not notice that she had stopped eating. She touched his wrist. He looked up. She showed him how to hold his fork with the tines pointed down.

Patrick sat behind me on the driftwood rocking chair. —Are you watching him or her? he asked.

The next day, I wore shoes for the second time when I cycled to Ganges. One of Roy's canisters had spoiled, and he hadn't had enough cream to deliver to Mrs. Lee. He said he would have to deliver the rest of the load today. I left before Patrick came downstairs for breakfast. I wanted Roy to myself. I wore Mom's peep-toe sandals, my own blue pedal-pushers, one of Joan's wire bras. Her gingham top lifted past my midriff when I raised my arms.

The pharmacist stood behind the counter in his white coat. He bent over a newspaper with a stub of yellow pencil. I think he was filling in a crossword. No one stood at the soda counter. The shelves were crammed with sundae glasses, which mirrored the vials on the pharmacist's side. Between the two halves

of the shop, I thought, there must be more glass than any other store on the island, except the pub. You could sit at the soda counter on stools or at one of three tin tables. A girl sat there now. I did not notice her at first. She had black hair to her chin. Thick eyebrows, which tented at the outside corners. Her cheeks were soft and long. She wore a striped dress. She sat by herself and ate a sundae from a tall petalled glass. Even through the window, I could see each topping: the beard of cream, chipped peanuts, a cherry. The spoon had a long handle. It bobbed from her hand like a cigarette holder. She looked up from her sundae and stared back at me. Her hair was fixed to her temple with a yellow barrette. Then Roy stepped from the back room behind the ice cream counter. He joined the girl at the table. I couldn't believe it. He bent over his elbows and watched the girl. She licked the cream off her long spoon. I hated her in that moment. Nibbling each peanut. Sucking the jellied cherry off its stone. He must have bought the sundae for her. I didn't know whether to leave or join them. She had already seen me, but he hadn't. She ate like my mother, carefully as a cat. The girl smiled. I walked in and sat in the last empty chair at their table. Roy looked at me in surprise. I avoided his eye contact. The skin around the girl's neck looked chafed. She loosened the collar of her dress.

Verne, this is Willa, said Roy.

Hi, Willa, said the girl.

Verne is staying with my parents.

Why? I asked.

Willa lives on the north end of the island. I know her mother, said Roy.

Verne lay her spoon across the glass.

I didn't know how long Verne had been there. She attended church with Roy's parents. No one spoke of her as gossip. Not even my mother.

The next morning, Mom sat outside in her kimono and sunglasses. I brought her a glass of orange juice, which she left on the table. Patrick had gone searching for a stick shaped like a Y for a slingshot.

Eventually, I took the glass onto my knee and pretended I had brought it for myself. I sat beside her on the porch swing. Mom pried lint from her toenails with a metal file.

Where did the girl come from? I asked her.

What girl? she said. She examined the lint between her fingers and blew it off her thumb.

The one who lives with Roy's parents. Her name is Verne.

Have they tried talking to you?

No.

Do me a favour, Duck. If Roy's parents talk to you, scream the foulest word you know.

Okay.

What's the foulest word you know?

I thought of Joan's words. —Cunt?

My mother laughed. —That's a start. *Stay away, you witch-hunting cunts.* Say that.

Okay.

Now.

Stay away, you witch-hunting cunts.

Shout it. Pretend I'm Roy's parents. She pushed my shoulder.

STAY AWAY YOU WITCH-HUNTING CUNTS!

So I introduced myself. I planned it for church the next Sunday, which Mom and Patrick never attended. I would sit beside Verne, and Roy's parents would invite me for lunch. I did not know how one would lead to the next, but I figured I would dress like a churchgoer and work the rest out from there. I wore pink. The dress sagged off my waist with an inch extra fabric. I looked all elbows and knees, but I figured it helped if I appeared hungry. At the church, I leaned my bike against the fence and polished my Mary Janes on the grass. Soon, my mother's friends arrived in their Plymouth. Pamela Rice, Wanda and Ko-Ko. They wore suits the colour of pale vegetables, watery-cucumber blouses and skirts with buttons like corn

kernels. I crouched back to my kickstand so they would not feel a need to say hi to me. They walked inside the gate, elbows linked, laughing brightly. I could not imagine my mother as one of them. Their husbands followed behind in the Cadillac. They wore banker suits. Eventually, I recognized Roy's parents. They were not so trim or rich as my mother's friends. They lived here all year round. Verne walked between them. Her eyes found mine right away. I fell into step behind them and followed them into a pew. My mother's friends sat nearer to the front of the church. They brayed to each other and tossed the hair out of their eyes.

We sang "How Great Thou Art" and "Holy, Holy, Holy." The pastor delivered a sermon about life in the garden. I thought he would talk about carrot seeds. It was a small island. We grew our own carrots. I thought he would lecture on virtues of self-sufficiency, but no. He meant *the* garden. "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked."

On the other side of Roy's parents, Verne was not listening. She sat with her knees pressed together and squeezed a mint wrapper in her fist. Her dress was okay—a light cotton with clumps of forget-me-nots—but she didn't wear socks or stockings. Like me, she only mouthed the words to the Lord's Prayer. I tried to catch her eye when we sat back down. She ignored me and stared out the stained glass window.

Roy's mother wore her hair in tight curls with bangs that barely filled her hairline. Her husband wore a loose brown suit. After the service, I turned to Roy's mother before she and her husband could stand.

That was nice, I said.

She looked surprised to be addressed by me.

I thought he was going to talk about gardening, I said.

She touched her husband's arm. —Harry, did you hear? She thought the sermon was about gardening. What's your name? she asked.

Willa.

Willow?

Will-*a*. I'm here by myself.

Her smile fell, but she picked it up. —Are you hungry? We're going home for roast beef and gravy sandwiches.

I'm starved.

I stared at Verne, who pedalled her heel into her shoe.

Hi, I said. Is it Verne?

His parents' farmhouse was nearer to the lake than the sea. They had planted a stone garden out front with beds of fragrant needled plants like rosemary and edible thistles. A fence led around back where they kept chickens and six pigs. The front porch was lined with lavender. I leaned in to smell and nearly inhaled a bee. I held my chin there a moment, the sun on my eyelids, wings humming, the scent drowsy and full. When I opened my eyes, the others had already stepped inside the house, except Verne, who lingered on the mat and watched me.

They had two tables in their kitchen, a round table, where Verne and I sat with glasses of milk, and a long oak table with straw placemats. Roy's father hadn't come inside yet. He was in the coop counting chickens. They had been fighting, the woman said. Her name was Irene. The chickens pecked each other to death. She lifted a loaf tin from the oven with quilted mitts. Out the side window I saw Roy filling a metal basin of water for the dogs. They had three Labs, which I could smell inside on their nubby tweed couch. Verne flattened her mint wrapper on the table. The milk left a slug of white on her lip. Milk dried onto my own lip, and I didn't lick it off either. I don't know why this felt like an interaction, like calling her bet in a game of cards.

Did you canoe here? I asked.

Her eyebrows sunk into a flat plane above her eyes. My eyes were darker than hers, I noticed. Her irises had an amber depth to them—resinous, like if I peered deep enough, I might find the wings of a moth.

No.

People often lied to me, and I pretended not to notice. But I wanted Verne to trust me. I thought she might also be sly.

Where did you find your yellow barrette?

Which barrette? she asked.

She wasn't wearing it today.

My sister's barrette. The yellow plastic one.

I waited for her eyebrow to lift, her earlobe to beat—the smallest muscle spasm to betray that I had affected her. But her face remained still.

Roy came into the kitchen. He kissed his mother on the cheek and leaned back against the stove. His eyes caught on mine—surprise registered on his face, but he didn't say anything. He turned to the icebox and poured himself a glass of milk. Irene gently pushed him away from the stove so she could drop eggs into a pot of boiling water. She passed him a plate of ruddy sliced beef and asked if he could lay the table. He carried the beef to the table with straw placemats. Verne stood and pulled a stack of plates from the cupboard. She dealt them on the mats, then circled the table again with the canister of knives and forks. I stood to help, though I didn't know where they kept their glasses. I caught my reflection in the window—the band of milk across my lip, Roy looking at me from behind. My cheeks burned and I wiped my mouth. Verne's lip was already clean.

At the counter, Irene sliced the bread, the steam unsealing from the crust and winding into the air. I had never known anyone to bake their own bread before. Much less while they were at church. The dough smelled ambrosial. There was something about yeast and oven heat. I wanted to tear off a lobe and stuff it steaming into my jaw. Roy's dad hulked in from outside and washed his hands at the sink. He sat at

the rectangular table and gestured for me to join him. I hesitated. If I sat opposite him, that would leave two chairs on either side—one on the corner and one adjacent—which left a fifty percent chance Roy would sit beside me. Alternatively, I could go to the bathroom and sit down on my return, but then Roy, Irene and Verne might have sat down already. So I sat opposite Harry. Irene set the bread on the table, along with a white Pyrex gravy boat. Verne sat at the end, between me and Harry. Roy sat on the other side of me. Irene drained the eggs and piled them onto a plate, where they clinked and rolled. I didn't look at Roy, but I could feel his warmth when I lifted my hand for a slice of bread. He smelled like sun and copper. I wondered how I smelled.

Verne, said Irene. Would you say grace?

I looked up to find Verne staring at my crab fingers pinching the bread too soon. I looked at Roy and he smiled.

Bless this food to our use, and us to your service, said Verne in a clear-water voice I could not help but listen to. —Fill our hearts with grateful praise. Amen.

It was the most I had heard her say.

The others murmured Amen.

Roy passed me the beef and our elbows knocked.

Pardon me, I whispered, though I didn't look up to see if he heard.

I listened to the president's commencement address on the radio, said Harry.

Irene leaned across the table for the salt shaker.

At Dartmouth College. Anyone catch it?

Our eyes travelled to each other expectantly, then rested on Harry. No one answered.

He was speaking to boys your age, Roy. You would have found it stirring. *Don't join the book burners*, he said. How do you like that?

Irene cracked an egg on the table and peeled it. She cut it lengthwise and sprinkled salt on the yolk. —Do you think they'll broadcast the coronation again, Harry? You know how they do sometimes.

Search me, he said.

I saw the Queen in Victoria, she said. She was only a princess then.

She circled her fingertip around the lid of the salt. The glass had been greased by oily thumbprints. The salt looked yellow inside.

Roy, you were with me. Do you remember?

He had been pressing his bread into a pool of gravy.

Of course.

You had barely turned sixteen. She reached across the table and cupped his cheek. —My handsome boy...

He sat patiently until she withdrew her hand. I thought she might smile with embarrassment, but instead she sighed. Her nails were not yellow like the salt. She had lacquered the tips.

Roy folded his bread in half and pushed it into his mouth. It reminded me of a French word I learned before school let out. *Gaver*, to force-feed. Madame Collet indicated the long neck of a goose, then mimed ecstatic choking. That's how they make foie gras, she said, which I had never tasted.

Verne reached for an egg. She saw me watching and paused. She lifted the plate and offered it to me. I took one to be polite.

Thank you, I said.

She chose one for herself. She thwacked it on the table and rolled it with her palm so the shell chipped. The fragments clung to the white's thin fabric, which she discarded on the side of her plate.

Willa, said Roy, under the voices of Irene and Harry, who were discussing something else from the radio. —How will you get home?

Verne bit the tip of her egg. She chewed slowly and swallowed.

Ride my bike? I wiped my mouth with my napkin.

Roy incised a strip off his beef and lanced it with his fork. He hovered the meat at his plate with the tines pointed down. —I could drop you off.

My mother may not be there, I lied.

He looked at me for a long time. He lifted the fork and slid the beef into his mouth.

At first, she called it a get-together. A few days earlier, she'd told Eugene she planned to have the neighbours over Wednesday night. The regular gang, you know. I suppose he asked what gang, because over the phone she said: The *gang*, Genie. Wanda and Pam. Yes, their husbands will be there. No, that one is Ko-Ko.

I lay on a towel in the grass while she recounted her plans to me and Patrick. Last month, Pamela Rice held a do with her nephew from Victoria, a barkeeper. She and her husband had returned from Cairo with a water pipe. It was a hit. No one had seen a *shisha* before. They sat on cushions on the floor and blew hoops of smoke in each other's eyes. It's all right if you can't smoke real tobacco, Mom said.

She had asked Roy to bartend. She bought limes and salt. She ordered tall bottles of gin, white rum, bourbon, tequila. Pamela and Gerald would bring their water pipe.

What about food? Patrick asked, as if interested.

We were drinking iced tea. Patrick hadn't been sitting long before he migrated to the hydrangea bush to complete some casual weeding. That gesture seemed fake to me—he didn't garden. I doubted he'd ever lifted a spade.

I thought we'd do the cantaloupe, said Mom.

He separated the globes of flowers with his hand and bowed into the opening. He combed his palms over the earth. Mom watched from her chair.

What do you think? she said. What does your mom serve at parties?

Patrick ripped a weed out of the soil. He sat back to examine the leaf, then tossed it behind him and ducked back inside the shrub. Mom stood from her chair and walked behind him. She slipped her foot from her velvet slipper and planted it on the base of his spine. He yanked out another weed and glanced at her foot over his shoulder. I watched them both, unable to move.

Sounds fine.

You weren't listening. What did I say? She kneaded her foot into his back.

He turned and her foot hung in the air.

Cantaloupe.

She lowered her heel back to the grass.

What else should we serve?

You know I'm happy with a sandwich, Aunt Dolly.

Dolly. Only Dad and Eugene called her that. My fingers screwed into the grass.

Oh hush. Tell me what you think about celery hearts.

Celery's okay.

Ducky, what do you think?

It was the first question she'd addressed to me. I couldn't answer. I funnelled my eyes at her accusingly.

Patrick walked his hands back into the garden bed. He remained enclosed this time, his hips flexing— buttocks clenching in his shorts. I remembered suddenly this was where he'd buried the dollhouse. Did Mom remember? Had he found fragments of it?

You've got a problem with aphids, he said finally. He backed out of the bush and blew a crushed insect off his thumb.

It's not a dinner or anything, Mom went on. I've always believed you should leave dinners to trained chefs. On Thanksgiving, I tried to imitate a meal we ate in Seattle and it was disastrous. You remember, Willa? Milk-fed chicken, creamed spinach, Lorette potatoes. Maybe we got the wrong kind of chicken. The potatoes were all right.

Patrick stood and walked back to the terrace stool. Soil filled his fingernails and the creases of his hands. I waited to see whether he would wipe them before he touched his drink. He did not. His finger pads left a column of black prints on the glass.

The day of the party, my mother mopped the floor for the first time that summer. She opened all the French doors and the sun blew in. The house became a wind tunnel and all the chiffon curtains sucked inside. They reminded me of whale baleen—white sheets to filter out the mayflies and summer pollens. Even in the centre of the house I could feel the sun on my skin. The breeze smelled of salt.

Mother swept around me. She held the dustpan in one hand, a small brush in the other. She had tied her hair back in a green scarf. Her lips kneaded a cigarette. A ribbon of blue smoke marked her progress across the floor. She had already cleaned the windows, and if you stepped close enough to the glass you could smell vinegar. I helped tidy the cushions on the sofa. I beat the rugs outside on the porch. The dust rose around me and I coughed. Mom emptied the dustpan into the lavender bed.

Why don't you pick some flowers? she said.

I picked lavender and filled the empty Campari bottles that had accumulated. I planted them on the dining table and windowsills, the butcher block in the kitchen and any ledge I could find. I rubbed the oil into my wrists and behind my ears, and the scent trailed my movement like my mother's smoke. In the living room, she put a record on. Her hips ticked to the beat as she dusted the mantelpiece. She had fixed herself a drink and held the tumbler in the same hand as her cigarette. She couldn't hear enough Anita O'Day that summer; I think she might have been singing "How High the Moon." The baleen blew in through the French doors. My mother sang and wiped motes off the mantel clock with her palm. Drink and sun warmed the apples of her cheeks. Nicotine cleared her eyes. She looked vital.

Darling, she said. If I give you a boost, could you reach the cobweb on the light fixture? She knit her fingers together and I stepped onto her hands. She lifted me as if I were no weight at all. A silk thread joined the fixture with the plaster. I separated it with my finger.

Good girl, she said into the backs of my knees. —Is it fun up there? She turned and whisked me in a circle through the air.

A barman from Ganges delivered the spirits. Then Roy arrived on his dumpy horse with buckets of ice. The pails did not fit in the freezer so we emptied the meat cuts and poured the ice right in. Mother marinated the celery hearts in honey. I squeezed condiments into a bowl for the shrimp cocktails: ketchup, horseradish, lemon juice, Tabasco, salt. Patrick mowed the lawn with the eggbeater mower. We couldn't hire musicians in time, so Mother selected albums from her collection and left a stack by the record player. She offered me five cents an hour to change sides. I said okay. She said, You don't need to decide anything. I've already selected an order. I scanned each paper sleeve to peruse the lineup: Anita, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Cole Porter. I slipped in Hank Williams when she wasn't looking—near the bottom so she'd be too flushed by then to tell me off. On every windowsill the lavender smelled of dopey bees.

Then, the levee—we drew a bath of Epsom salts and rosemary oil. My mother stood naked in the tub, the water branding thick cuffs around her calves. She shifted her weight uncomfortably and rubbed her shoulders. I knelt beside the tub and rinsed water over my forearms. She crouched. Heat rashed over her thighs every time her tailbone bobbed in the water. With a sharp breath, she sat and her body unfolded along the basin. She rested back against the tile. Her skin appeared smoothed rather than smooth, as though her blemishes had been dulled by cigarette smoke and pots of expensive cream from Eaton's. Her teeth were a fraction too large for her mouth, though square, trophy-like. I had my father's eyes—round and gullible. My mother had eyes like two slivered almonds.

In the bath, my mother massaged cream up her calves and stripped it with a razor. I held her hair back. She had not soaped yet. A gentle odour leaked from her armpits.

Would you like to come in? she asked. We had not bathed together since I was a kid.

Is it hot?

Not too bad.

I peeled off my socks and sat on the rim of the tub. The water yellowed when I dipped my heels in. Most days, I did not wear socks. My mother sighed back and closed her eyes. Her skin was evenly tan for a woman her age. None of her friends sunbathed without a costume. I thought of the sphinx with the

head of a woman, body of a cat and bird's wings, carved from a block of stone. Outside, Patrick clattered the lawn mower back into the shed. I worried briefly he would enter the house while we padded down the hallway, swollen and ruddy from the bath, only a towel between him and our breasts.

What stands on one leg and keeps its heart in its head? said my mother. I looked at her. Her eyes remained closed.

What? I said. I pulled my dress over my head and slipped into the bath, facing her.

A cauliflower. She guided my foot into her lap and rubbed it with soap.

Joan didn't leave any party clothes here, so I made do with my own wardrobe. I wore a green and white circle skirt. I combed my hair with a side part and fixed it out of my eyes with a metal pin. Mother wore her rosé dress with a scoop neck and fitted midriff. She curled her hair in a neat parcel around her head. She looked like something you might squeeze into a drink. We had both dressed hours before the guests were due. Now we sat on the sofa in the living room, our bodies arranged lengthwise to avoid wrinkling our skirts. It was Patrick's turn to bathe. He had been in the bathroom a long time.

You look grown up, Mom said.

Thank you.

Who said I meant it as a compliment? Her eyebrows appeared darker than usual, as if she tinted them with pencil. —Kidding, she said.

Roy was outside filling a trough of water for his horse. We both felt their absence—Patrick and Roy's. We sat like two acquaintances whose mutual friends had gone to the bathroom. Yet we shared a basic intimacy. Our silence was tolerable because we knew the other felt it too. And we had bathed together. She had washed my foot.

Is that my shirt? she asked.

No.

It was a blouse I had adopted from Joan as she stopped wearing it. I hadn't washed it and I could smell the honeyed fragrance of her body odour and roll-on deodorant.

It's nice having you around the house, she said.

I had never left the house and didn't know what she meant. We smiled at each other.

At six we heard an engine up the drive. It was too early for guests. I stood from the couch and entered the dining room, where I could see the driveway from the window. Every movement in that skirt felt unattached from the earth, my feet loosed from the floorboards. I could get into this role of women who float. I expected to find Pamela Rice's Plymouth in the drive, or even Roy's parents. I did not anticipate Eugene's Buick, which he took on the vehicle ferry to Victoria. He sat behind the steering wheel in his work suit and an olive tie. Luke squirmed in the centre seat, grinning at me from under his cowboy hat. Joan perched next to him. She opened the door and untucked her legs from the car. She wore pale stockings and a pleated dress, her pearl hair pinned into a roll. She had our father's squared jaw and china-blue eyes, and in that moment, I wished she had stayed at Linda's.

Hey, Mom?

She joined me at the window. We watched our family trail to the house. We turned to face the front door. She didn't open it for them, but pulled a cigarette from her carton and lit it. Eugene opened the door and stood on the mat while Luke beetled around his legs toward me. Then he too stopped short. We must have been a sight, given they had left us with unwashed hair and bare feet, Mom in her kimono, me in an onion sack. Joan paused beside Eugene, then continued over the threshold. She touched Luke's shoulder and guided him toward her.

Well I hope we're invited, she said. Her tone was breezy.

Mom blew a stream of smoke from her mouth.

I'm sorry, said Eugene. Are we interrupting?

You should have said something, said Mom.

The guests were due in an hour.

Luke removed his cowboy hat. He had acquired a string tie in Victoria, and played with the silver horse medallion distractedly. —Can I wear my cowboy hat? he asked.

Eugene half-stomped, half-limped after Mom into the living room, his bad foot sweeping the floorboards behind him. Joan and I followed. I could feel her stare roaming up my hips to her blouse tucked into my waistband. I didn't meet her eyes.

Yes, Luke, I said.

In the living room Mom stood next to a vase of tall peonies. The petals were a similar pink to her dress, and they made her appear as part of a greater apparatus—a system of plants.

Roy walked in from the back of the house. He had changed into suit trousers and a shirt that looked pressed long ago, as though he'd worn them once for a funeral, then carefully hung each item back in his closet.

Who are you? asked Eugene.

The bartender, said Mom.

My name is Roy. His eyes gravitated toward Joan. She smiled at him and looked down. I understood the courtesy of this gesture. She pretended not to notice his gaze so he could stare less bashfully. Mom had observed the same moment. Our eyes met, then slid to opposite corners of the room.

Then Patrick appeared from upstairs in grey slacks and a white collared shirt, his school's emblem stitched onto the collar. He took in Joan too, appraised her silently, as you would a sculpture in a museum.

You're involved too? said Eugene.

Patrick pried his eyes off my sister—scanned all of us, calculating who was angry at whom, which side to take. He didn't answer his father.

Are those my socks? said Eugene.

I followed his stare to Patrick's feet. He wasn't wearing shoes. I recognized them from the wash in Victoria. They were cranberry. The cloth winged slightly from Patrick's toe.

That's it, said Eugene.

That's what? said Mom.

I'll talk to the owner of the marina. Kenneth can take a week off.

What has he got to do with anything?

I came home to discuss the options with you, but you're carrying on like a deadbeat. He fixed his eyes on Roy.

A deadbeat? my mother laughed. She clutched her cigarette to her mouth and reached her other hand for the bookshelf.

Joan, come with me upstairs. I threaded my arm through her elbow and pulled her toward the stairwell. —I want you to tell me about kissing.

What? she said. Out of surprise, she did not resist. I looked back and Mom met my eyes again. Patrick's gaze followed us up the stairs.

Upstairs in her room with seahorse wallpaper, I sat on the bed and Joan stood at the window without a blouse, her arms folded behind her back to fasten her bra. Her shoulder blades pushed from her back and made her look thin, though she had gained weight this summer—a feminine band around her buttocks.

What's going on? she asked as she turned to adjust the weight of her breasts in the cups.

My own chest would never fill that bra. The cups were pointed like martini glasses.

Nothing, I said.

Who's that younger guy?

No one.

Yeah, right. Is Mom screwing him?

I winced.

Are you?

I must have looked horrified, because she laughed.

Never mind. Stop staring at my tits, by the way. I'm wearing insets.

She changed into a red button pencil dress and white pumps. It felt unlucky for my sister to be so devastating.

You look nice, by the way, she said. Are you wearing enough petticoats?

Hm?

Want to borrow mine? She rooted through her drawer and tossed me one of her crinolines. —
Wear that instead of the taffeta, she said. It's got more pouf.

Thank you.

You look fine without makeup, but do you want me to go over your eyes?

Okay.

Only if you want.

Sure.

Sit here. I'm so jealous of your skin. She dipped her eye pencil in a glass of water and wiped it on her forearm.

At parties in Victoria, Joan and I used to dance under the stairs. Mom dressed us in frocks that tied at the back, socks folded over our polished shoes, and Joan danced smoothly, she understood how to skip her feet to the beat and sashay her hips like you see in the movies. I ran in circles with my arms stretched behind me as if I were trying to fly. Every so often I would kneel to examine a bottle cap on the floor or curtsy to one of Mom's friends, then I would take off again, zipping through the living room with my arms trailing behind me like a wake. And in summer we danced in the orchard behind our house, dirt licking the sides of our black Oxfords, my pudgy legs next to Joan's long ones. We didn't need music then.

She and I made our way downstairs, a slow-moving duo—my sister confined by her snug skirt, me by my orb of crinoline. From the stairwell, the guests of the party looked like somnolent fish. Someone had dimmed the lights, and more brightness shone from amber lamps and the horizon outside. The guests drifted through the murk, as though under a felt of warm algae. Their scales glimmered. A candelabra stood in the corner of the room. Ko-Ko wore a black and white panel dress, which matched her sunless cheeks and the stole of hair she had smoothed over her shoulder. Wanda O'Reilly wore a swollen pink dress with long sleeves. A brooch joined the two halves of her bodice. When we got downstairs I saw it was a drooping jaguar with limp limbs and a tail, as though the pelt had been shucked from the animal's frame and thrown over a curtain rod. Roy prepared drinks at a card table in the far corner of the room. He cupped a cocktail shaker and beat it up and down.

He's handsome, said Joan.

He lifted his eyes to us and raised a glass. Again, his gaze lingered on Joan. Mom stood with Eugene and Pamela's husband, who mimed how to light the coals for the water pipe. She smiled now and

then at his charade, but her focus remained on the other side of the room. Roy did not return her glance, though she watched with such devotion, he must have noticed. I hadn't seen Patrick yet.

I guided Joan to the middle of the living room, where we had cleared the sofas for a dance floor, and where Wanda threatened to inveigle her husband into a foxtrot; she pressed her palms to her waist and sucked in her figure and shimmied her shoulders in such a way that was meant to be inviting. Joan dropped her hand in mine, and we stepped back and forth with half the clumsiness and energy we used to. I surveyed Ko-Ko's dress, her black strap of hair. If I studied her beauty, I hoped then, I could absorb it—I would grow longer, pointed in the right directions. Then I saw him—squatting in the corner with Luke's rock tumbler.

The tumbler had arrived in a card box last December, one week before Christmas. None of us had seen Dad since Eugene moved in, but his parcels arrived like clockwork one week before birthdays and Christmas. In his card, he said if Mom let us visit him, he would teach Luke how to use it. *In the meantime, Willa will help you read the manual.* That he'd entrusted me with the task inflated me with pride; I committed my energies to the manual last winter, reading the steps before guiding Luke through each one. Rock tumbling was a long process—each cycle required days of patience as the rocks spun first with coarse grit, then medium, then fine grit in week three, and finally polish. But after that final cycle, it was magic: the lustre unlocked their colour, so what had appeared dull on the beach opened into agate or mossy green. My favourite was striped gold and black, shaped like the heart of my palm.

Luke had recently finished a batch; the tumbler was empty. But at the back wall, where he had left the device plugged in, Patrick crammed the barrel with silty rocks from the garden.

Hey, I called. Cut it out. You'll jam it.

When I reached him, I snatched the barrel from his hands and tucked it toward my armpit.

So?

It's my brother's.

I unplugged the machine and slotted it onto a high bookshelf, placing the barrel beside it.

When I turned back, his eyelids had sunk into an even, bored plane.

I know where Mom's keeping the spare liquor, I said.

We sat outside on the porch swing, sipping from a bottle of gin. Patrick gulped swigs that sparkled down his chin. I took tidier sips. Our eyes kept chiming together in a way that made me feel warm. I knew this angle of his face well—his small ear and cheekbone, the blade of his nose. His hair had been recently clipped to his scalp, except on the top of his head, where it rose in a subtle wave.

Suddenly the lamps inside shut off—maybe a guest flicked a switch by accident. Darkness fell over the porch. I grew conscious of an even tapping, his finger on the arm of the swing. When the lights flipped back on, I was still staring at him: Eugene's socks, the school shirt with sleeves rolled past the elbows, his strong finger punching into the metal arm—and he was staring at me. A breeze wafted over us, rustling the ivy on the fence so the vines looked alive, sucking termites from the wood.

I'm cold, I said. Can we go in?

I had only taken a sip or two of gin but when I stood I could feel it, my head swayed with the motion. Patrick must have felt the same sensation because he also started to laugh.

When we returned inside, Mom stood in a circle of neighbours whose hands refracted light from their cigarettes and martinis and slits of sapphire. Luke sat against the wall in the shadow of a grandfather clock. He ate pineapple rings from a tin. Joan bent over him, coaxing him to stand.

Beside me, Eugene clapped Patrick on the back and said, You behaved yourself this week?

Like a soldier.

Eugene sucked the saliva off his tongue—releasing it in an undulating motion that wiped his front teeth. His grip tightened on Patrick's shoulder, but before he could say his usual *don't be smart*, Ko-Ko's husband stretched his hand toward Patrick, said, This your son?

So they say.

Patrick set his mouth as they chuckled.

I'm tucking this fella into bed. Joan appeared beside me, Luke's fist clamped around the hem of her dress. With his other hand, he clawed the sleep from his eyes.

I knew I should offer to help, but I only nodded. She steered him toward the stairs. When Luke looked back at me, I mouthed goodnight.

Pamela stepped between us, blocking my view—her breasts packed into a Grecian neckline, palms filled with limes she had fetched from the kitchen. She presented them to Roy.

I approached the bar, waited until Pamela backed out into the dance floor, a drink in each hand.

Roy nodded to me and raised a glass of whatever he was sipping. —Would you like a drink?

What kind? I asked, knowing a whole drink would ruin me.

Do you like limes?

I nodded. He squeezed half a lime into a glass and stirred it with sugar and crushed mint, which he had plucked from outside. He wet the glass with white rum and filled the rest with ice and soda.

That's Cuba's drink, he said.

I accepted the glass from him and sipped. It tasted green, effervescent.

Roy, could I have a sidecar?

Mom's palm settled on the back of my neck, stroked the skin under my collar. She bowed to sniff my glass, the mist of carbonation dusting her nose. —Are you getting her drunk?

Hey, he said with a shrug. —That's Cuba's drink.

She frowned at him. Cuba had been in the headlines a lot—the president had seized back power, and there were rumblings of a paramilitary group forming to overthrow him.

Across the room, Pamela stood like the Statue of Liberty, gripping her cocktail away from her like a torch. It reminded me of what my mother said this summer when we were taking a family photo in front of Eugene's yacht. She taught me and Joan a trick. She said it would be useful one day. Keep your hands on your hips when someone takes a photo of you. Otherwise the flesh of your arms will bunch at your armpits. That was the first moment I ever considered my flesh. I knew Joan was beautiful, but I also

thought of my French teacher that way. Her armpits bunched. In the picture, Joan and I wear white jumpers, my mother in long-waisted yacht pants, all six of our arms bent at our hips like duck wings. Eugene printed three copies. I buried mine in the yard.

Duck, why don't you see if anyone wants a top-up?

Roy played with a cube of ice on his scoop. The cube shifted up and down, back and forth in a miniature cross, a puddle sweating around it.

Willa, said Mom.

I scowled at her and left them at the bar. On the dance floor, Pamela lifted her sternum so high she looked like a goddess of war, levitating above them all, ready to pin them with arrows. Eugene described to her his plans for the new gazebo. Wanda swayed by herself in her pink dress, arms bent like a cactus. Ko-Ko whispered into Pamela's husband's ear, and all of them appeared so wicked and clownish, I turned and went upstairs.

Joan sat with Luke in his bed. She looked grand in the toy-sized frame, like a mother who hired a nanny to conduct the cleaning and feeding, who remained bright at the eve of a day, who read to her son *and* attended parties, clasped the hands of strangers, took drinks and cigarettes, danced. She would balk at that description—she always denied her maternal instinct. I'm a good sister, she would say. That's all. But here she sat, reading from a book of bedtime stories. She had a voice I liked to hear with my eyes closed. I sipped my Cuban drink and leaned back against the headboard.

Her voice paused and I felt the glass tug from my hand. I opened my eyes. She leaned over Luke's forehead to sip the beverage, then passed the glass back to me. We continued to pass the drink back and forth as she read. After the story, Luke asked for another. I left her with the drink and went down the hall to my own room. Out the window, dark had fallen and a pale navel of moon illuminated the seafoam. It reminded me of Verne and the blue queasiness I had been feeling—an unease with the fact of her, her coolness toward me. Had I dreamed the canoe, the rabbit, the barrette?

Roy and Mother were another source of queasiness. I thought it best to ignore them. I would return to Joan and we would scavenge the cupboards for bridge mix or chocolate chips. Eugene would be in bed soon—too loud and red faced to go on suavely. He had a keen sense of embarrassment and when to excuse himself. Mother will have fortified the corner with Roy, petting his cheek, lighting his cigarettes, passing him a tumbler for refills.

I passed Luke's room on the way back down and saw Joan had fallen asleep beside him. I waited long enough in the doorway for her to sense my presence and open an eye. She had a mother's awareness, no matter what she said—a shallowness of sleep.

Come in, she said. There's room for three.

I thought you'd be back downstairs.

She shook her head. —Should I be? Come in. You're letting in the light.

I want bridge mix.

Oh, do we have any? Don't get my hopes up.

I'm not sure. Want to come?

I'll wait here.

You'll fall asleep.

I won't. I'll stick coins in my eyes.

We played this game as children. You lay pennies or nickels over your eyelids. Whoever woke with the coins still on her face won. It was to do with poise. The ability to control movement, even in sleep.

Don't eat all the jujubes, she said.

Downstairs, the guests were not standing any longer. They had spread themselves over the floor cushions. The men had removed their socks. Their heels were cast over the wood like pale onions. The women still wore their pumps, which made their thighs look thinner. Their limbs folded over each other in lazy

bundles. I could not discern whose calves began at whose hips or knees. Mr. Tobin had removed his trousers. I should have turned away then, but I felt riveted. My mother's friends did not move with their eyes. They moved by their hands, sedately. Eugene had not gone to bed. Pamela measured his long thighs with her fingernails. He clamped toward her and shuddered. Mom sat on the floor with one knee up, the other foot massaging Mr. O'Reilly's crotch. In her hand, she held the mouthpiece of the *shisha* pipe. The hose slunk over her thigh from the water bowl. She sucked in. The water bubbled. A spectre of smoke trailed from her lips. The gramophone played a sawdusty cello. Ko-Ko searched the creases of Wanda's knees with her nose. Someone had closed the windows and the air smelled of apple smoke; orange and bergamot; tequila; damp underwear; Worcestershire sauce. Pamela unbuttoned Eugene's trousers and took the weight of him into her palms. His hips pushed toward her. All of their limbs undulated to the same wallowing bass. I could not see Roy or Patrick. The moment I registered that, a hand settled on my shoulder. Patrick stood behind me, dishtowel folded over his elbow, as if he'd taken a turn behind the bar.

Where's your sister? he asked.

In bed.

Do you want to go outside?

I felt a pang of guilt, remembering the bridge mix. But I let Patrick guide me to the door. He waited on the porch while I slipped into Mom's canvas shoes. The record finished on the player. No music seeped from the open doors, no glasses clinked, no one spoke. The house was silent, but brimming over like a rush of weeds growing or tide pools filled with pulpous anemones. I took his hand and led him along our path to the sea. His palm sweated into mine.

Watch your step, he said, though I could run to the beach with my eyes closed. When he spoke, his voice fluttered before it found his usual rhythm. He was nervous, I thought.

At the shore, he continued past the high-tide mark and stirred the water with a whip of kelp.

Hey, he said. Phosphorescence.

I combed the sand until I found a flat rock, then hucked it at the water. The stone skipped three times. A fleet of bright worms peeled off each ring.

Ever swum in phosphorescence? he asked.

I shook my head.

I won't look, he said. He turned away and lifted his shirt over his head.

The muscles in his back cinched together. I rotated too, glancing behind me to check if he was watching. I unbuttoned my skirt. He unzipped his trousers. I pulled off my silk blouse without undoing all the buttons, waded out of Joan's crinoline and folded both on the log.

Still not looking, he said as he walked naked to the water.

I left my panties on. My hands fanned over my breasts to hide my nipples.

The cold would take my breath away, but I didn't wish to enter daintily, my breasts glowing in the dark like two raw scallops. I lowered my arms and crashed into the sea. The phosphorescence trailed after me. Sparks spun from my hips when I shifted to face Patrick. He dove from the shore. As his back breached the surface, blue lights poured over his shoulders, turned from his thighs. I couldn't feel the cold. He touched my cheek.

It's in your hair, he said.

When he laid me in the shallows, my heels continued to float. A wave rocked me onto my tailbone, my knees roaming to the surface from the buoyancy of salt. I laughed because the tide would not let me sit, and when I flapped for balance, sparks dripped from my elbows. Patrick lowered himself onto my hips.

Is this okay? he asked.

I nodded. Joan had demonstrated sex with paper cutouts from *Silver Screen* and the Eaton's catalogue. I understood it was something to get over with. I watched his face for clues to the shapes my face should make. He pushed my panties to one side and searched between my legs. His finger settled on

one divot and flicked. His fingernail was long, but he stroked carefully, like a dentist. Goosebumps flushed my up wrists.

Is this okay? he asked again.

I nodded, but his eyes were closed. He opened them when I did not answer.

Yes, I said.

We looked at each other as he rubbed me, and another rash of feeling prickled my skin.

His hand burrowed under the small of my back and he hoisted me up the shore so I could rest my shoulders. Joan had said sex started from kissing, so I pecked the corner of his mouth. He pecked me back. Then his penis butted into the bone of my thigh. The contact startled me at first, this fifth limb. He kissed my neck. A surge of sensation unrolled between my legs. His penis butted my crease, where he was stroking, then my anus. He was trying to find a way in. I opened my legs to help, but held my breath.

Relax, he whispered.

I tensed deeper. He found a space where he could push inside. I gasped at the surprise of it.

Are you all right?

I nodded, but wanted to know how much longer this would take. The ocean had grown cold. A rock cut into my buttocks.

He sunk deeper, and I grunted at the pain, then relaxed as I saw the pleasure display across his face. His privates jangled with mine and after a few moments the impact felt less like an injury. His palm rammed into the sand above my head. His mouth waxed open, his eyes bunched in gladness, and sparks of phytoplankton hurled between our belly buttons. His mouth contorted and a groan poured from his throat. He pumped twice more and folded beside me.

I wanted to nurse him. I peeled a band of seaweed off his chest. I pressed my nose into the hollow of his collarbone.

I awoke in my bed with blankets tucked to my chin. A knot had formed in my back from the jar of cream, which I now felt bulging under the mattress. I whipped off the top sheet and found a spot of blood on the bed linen. Four clay fingerprints stamped my thigh.

My sister knelt on a bank of seaweed with my underwear in her palms. She dunked it under water. She rubbed the stain with a small stone.

Downstairs, my neighbours gathered their limbs and walked home with soreness between their legs.

Wanda hid a salt stain with her handbag. Pamela searched the living room for her stockings and husband.

Maybe they're together? said Mom.

Pamela sucked the spit from her gums. She picked a penny off the floor.

Wanda! shouted Wanda's husband. He tripped after her with the unopened bottle of wine they had brought.

Ko-Ko sat in the driver's seat of her husband's Cadillac and peeled an orange.

Eugene lay awake in the bathtub. My mother knocked on the door and he pretended to sleep.

I know you're awake, she said.

She climbed inside the tub and passed him a mug of coffee.

No one had closed the curtains, and sun pounded through the window. When I opened my eyes, it seemed to me the walls had curved. They folded around me like the dome of a cabbage, the light translucent, filtered through veins and ribbing, the waxed cuticle of a leaf you could dip in water. My throat was parched. I wanted to drink from this leaf, to immerse the bract into a full sink. As I lay there, the walls

crisped back into hard angles. Something scratched at the door. It was a gentle sound, one penny scraping the date off another penny. While I identified the origin as a teacup and saucer, someone knocked. I tugged the duvet over my thighs and waited for whoever it was to barge in as normal. No one did.

Come in, I called, my voice hoarser than expected. I cleared my throat and found even more phlegm to descale. I continued to hork as Joan nudged the door open with a breakfast tray.

I thought you wouldn't want to come down, she said. She had brought a wire rack of toast and two cups of tea.

I turned to the window, embarrassed, and focused my gaze on the embroidered curtain, the pattern of leaves you could trace with your fingers.

You gave me a scare last night—covered in mud like the creature from the black lagoon.

Sorry.

Hold this.

She passed me the tray as she sank onto the mattress and smoothed the bedsheets over our laps. When she finished, I lowered the tray. I didn't have much of an appetite, but a twisting knot in my stomach told me I must be hungry, so I opened the jar of blackberry jam and spread a spoonful on a piece of toast. Joan blew a ripple across her tea and sipped.

Kenneth's coming, she said, lowering the tea to her lap. She clasped her hands around the cup. — Eugene talked to his boss. He'll drive up and return to San Diego with Patrick.

I nodded, disappointed that Patrick was going, but sensing the disappointment was a by-product of relief. It would be too much if he stayed all summer—what had happened was spontaneous combustion. You couldn't repeat it.

I wiped a seed of jam from my finger to the crust. —You must be pleased, I said. To see him again.

You and Patrick get along, right?

I sipped my tea.

Could you distract him while Ken's here? We don't have much time. I want to make the most of it.

I looked at her—gingham pyjama shirt open around her chest bone, hair dangling inside her collar, her soft cheeks, the girlish gap between her teeth.

Besides, Kenneth might ask me something, she said, a smile brimming.

Ask you what?

She shrugged. —It's the last time I see him before he goes to college.

Outside, the last guest's car churned the gravel from the drive and rolled out. The house fell silent.

Just let Ken and me have some alone time, she said.

I lowered my toast to the tray and leaned back on the pillow, tilting my cheek away from her. Out the window, a jay hammered the trunk of a fir tree.

I have a headache, I said. I might try to sleep longer.

But it's eleven.

Just another half-hour or so.

I pushed the tray off my lap, and after a moment, she climbed from the bed and lifted it from the mattress.

Are you okay, Willa?

I'll be down in a jiff.

I curled on my side and listened to her feet kiss down the hall.

Over the next two days, no one mentioned the party. Roy did not return to the house. He had left in the night before the other guests. He wasn't there when Patrick and I crept in from the beach. My desire to see him had faded. I sensed it had for Mom as well. His absence proved she no longer thought of him, as I no longer thought of him, as if our combined wills had drawn Roy here—not hers alone, nor mine, nor his.

Patrick avoided me also, but I felt his stare sometimes at dinner, or when I emerged downstairs in my nightgown. We were cordial with each other, our interactions clipped with new politeness, full

sentences, please and thank you, eyes sliding to opposite sides of the room, only watching each other when we thought the other was not looking. We sensed the other person, of course, if anything our sense of the other person had intensified, but we allowed each other that civility, to pretend not to know we were watched.

On the third day, Eugene met Kenneth at Long Harbour, where he had taken the vehicle ferry from Vancouver. I watched from the window as Kenneth's Hudson Hornet pulled into the drive. His face lifted to the house my dad built, taking it in, as if the house had acquired new meaning since his last visit.

Willa, Kenneth's here, Mom called from downstairs.

I returned to bed, stared at the wall opposite, the picture Dad embroidered during the war, when hospitalized for two months—pine cones, a sparrow nestled in the tree's young fingers. I wondered where he was now. When he would give us a call.

I didn't distract Patrick at first. I chased Luke around the garden, knelt with him on the living room carpet while he described his stamps. But the spheres of attention that circled Patrick and me—each of us sharpened toward the other person, intuiting where they stood in the room, whom they spoke to, at the same time we ignored their existence—overlapped. He sat on the driftwood rocking chair and read *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. I recognized it as my dad's copy—coffee ring circling the letters of Hemingway's name like a searchlight.

Possibly I had grown, or the water was too hot when I washed them, but my shorts felt small. The flesh of my hips pushed the hems so the fabric edged up my thighs. Patrick noticed. He noticed also the scrape on my knee from the beach. The hair I hadn't washed, which tangled down my back.

This is the 1952 migratory bird stamp, said Luke. He pointed to a stamp with two ducks, the wings of one stretched back, the other clamped forward, the sky broken with lemonade streaks.

I like that one best so far.

It's worth three cents.

I spotted Patrick's smile from the corner of my eye—at the book or Luke, I couldn't tell.

Pat told me stamps can be accepted as legal tender, said Luke.

Did he?

Patrick had tucked a white T-shirt into his slacks, a pair of sunglasses bracketing his collar, pant legs cuffed so they revealed his socks. He sat with one loafer on the chair seat, the spine of his book resting on his knee.

That's right, pal. Have you counted how much yet?

I tried. But some of the stamps aren't Canadian or American and I don't know how to score those. Luke shifted the weight off one leg to tug the sock up his calf. His hair had been trimmed to a crewcut in Victoria. Mom always let it grow to his ears.

Like this L one, said Luke. What does that mean?

Patrick leaned over his book to peer at the stamp. —That means sterling, pal. They use that funny money in England.

Oh.

Why don't you count it all up anyway, as if they're dollar signs? Or is that math too hard for you.

No, math's my best subject. I know my times tables up to twelve times twelve.

Good for you, kid, but adding's trickier—you have all those decimals. Do you have a sheet of paper? Do you know how to write three cents as a decimal?

Luke frowned at his stamps as he considered how to answer.

He's seven, I said. I don't think they've learned decimals yet.

Patrick smiled, tossing his head to shift the hair from his eyelashes. —Well I think he's smart enough. Don't you?

Sure I am, said Luke.

Why don't you ask Dad for some paper in his office. He'll help.

Luke snapped the leather binder shut. —How fast you think I can count it in?

Don't know, pal. Go for it.

He wrapped his arms around the binder and scooted out of the room calling for Eugene.

The room fell quiet again. I didn't know where to look and let my eyes fall to the patch of carpet the album had indented, as if it were still there. Similarly, Patrick returned attention to his book, but I could feel him watching me over the dust jacket.

I had begun to shift my position on the rug when he said, Your shorts are too small.

I paused, my hips raised in the air over my ankles. I lowered them back to my calves and tried to stretch the material along my thighs.

It's not a bad thing, he said.

He had lifted his hand from the book spine. Now it rested on the sunglasses at his collar, swishing the plastic arm back and forth across his chest. His eyes traced the bone of my chin, the crush of hair behind my ears, a strand wedged under the strap of my training bra, the flesh under my armpits where the bra chafed, the belly I sucked in, buttocks pressing into my heels from kneeling. Something unfolded between us—his eye on me, my acquiescence. My swelling to meet his gaze, puffing of the chest, staring at the carpet and tucking the stray hair behind my ear. I felt fullest when he watched me.

*

Kenneth called it a “promise ring”—owned by his great-grandmother, a ruddy topaz flanked by two diamonds on a gold hoop, a sun-ray detail on the reverse. They would make the engagement official when he graduated from university. Joan agreed. She still had to finish high school. She couldn't wait to show Linda. *The ring's a hundred years old*, she bragged over the telephone. The band was too big for her ring finger, and she developed a tic of sliding her thumb to touch the gold to check it was still there. It was a nervous habit, this sliding and checking.

*

When the boys left, we followed their car down the dirt road—Joan blowing kisses, Luke chasing the rear tires, impervious to the dust that swallowed him, coating his cheeks. Eugene stood with one hand raised in salute. Mom lingered behind. We looked at each other. She pulled me in and her arm softened around my waist.

Joan boiled a kettle of water, and we drank tea on the terrace. Mom found gingersnaps in a tin. We ate carefully, our silence restorative. Instead of words, our tongues cracked brittle pieces of cookie. Joan rotated the ring to catch light, to play with how the sun bounced off her finger. Eventually, Mom excused herself for a nap.

A parcel had been placed on my pillow. It was wrapped in newspaper, *With love from P* scrawled in black ink. I closed the door behind me. The package was light, no wider than a pair of wool socks. My fingers wedged under the tape. I unfolded the paper. Inside was a floppy elephant sewn from a tea towel. The fabric felt oily in my hands. It smelled of dirt. Under the elephant, in a cradle of newspaper, sat the barrette.

Golden State

I learned later that Roy's aunt and uncle fostered children in Victoria—part of what would be called the “baby scoop,” where infants were taken from hundreds of thousands of unmarried women and distributed among foster homes or placed for adoption. In the years after the Second World War, most of the unmarried women were Caucasian, but from the 1960s, the scoop targeted indigenous families. Verne experienced the worst of all prejudices, I imagine—her father white, her mother from the Musqueam band in Vancouver.

My conscience still darkens when I consider that summer—how I linked her with what I found in the trees. Any resident of the islands will be familiar with boats wedged above high-tide mark. It wasn't the canoe that bothered me, but the rabbit. Imagining the task step by step. First he would have to catch the animal with his bare hands—perhaps lure her with a wheel of cucumber from his sandwich. He would clutch her in one palm, or press her belly-up to the earth and slice her throat. With a Swiss Army knife, maybe. All the boys owned Swiss Army knives. Sawing the head would be a messy task—the knife too short and blunt to sever the spinal cord. He'd need to wiggle the blade between the vertebrae, chipping fragments of bone until the cervical spine snapped in two, eventually twisting the animal with both hands as you open a jar, separating the cartilage, muscle and arteries from her neck, then stringing the creature by her feet with twine, leaving her to bleed out. Unmotivated by hunger, without the correct instruments, it would be a gruesome task. For no audience but himself.

I never asked if he did it. Someone else might have hunted her for food; he might have found the toy and barrette by coincidence, like me. But later, after what happened, my mind would return to the rabbit strung in the tree. It had been too easy to push her from my mind. To avoid thinking the task through.

Between our first meeting in 1950 and the last in 1961, I saw him six times. Our relationship unrolled in these episodes. In the intervals between, we didn't exist. He didn't exist to me. I didn't exist to him.

1957—San Diego, California

Everything I knew of California I learned when I was twelve—the blue desert, Valencia oranges, the smell of hot tires, my sister in an Orlon sweater, the woman who stole a plastic flamingo from our hotel, the surf gods, egg rolls from Fat City, sand in my swim costume, all the convertibles on Ocean Beach that parked to watch the sun duck under.

At the wedding, I promised Mom I would watch Luke. We played hide-and-seek in the garden while Patrick danced with a hazel-skinned girl from La Jolla, who attended one of those *fine Eastern schools*. The guests often spoke of the East this way—with admiration. If anyone wanted to command attention, all they had to add was “in New York” or “Long Island,” or “he teaches at Yale.”

I’d thought Eugene was rich, but he bore little resemblance to these people. They all spoke with their teeth clenched, and smiled that way too. They even smoked their cigarettes with gritted mouths, molars grinding saliva at the back. The women were thin. Their gemstones appeared bulky by contrast, like insects preying on their throats or licking the sweat between their fingers.

I crouched in the azaleas and watched Patrick dance. I didn’t expect to feel jealous. Yet a clamminess settled into my stomach as their hips jangled, his arm around her waist—as if their twisting unpinned what we’d shared four years earlier. That was the moment I considered our time together a pinning, an experience that imprinted me at that age, that clasped me like a hand.

I’m bored, Willa.

Luke squatted beside me. He didn’t even say, *You’re it*. He followed my gaze toward the tent, the patchwork of guests dancing.

Shh, I hissed.

Your dress is too bright for this game.

Can't you read your comics or something?

He set his jaw. He didn't say, *Mom said you have to play with me*, like I could tell he wanted. He was eleven now—too old to play hide-and-seek. Not bold enough to make his own friends at family events. Size contributed to his shyness. He still hadn't had his growth spurt.

Okay, I said, let's go inside.

It was Saturday; *Gunsmoke* was on. I sat on the sofa and read the titles of book spines while Luke untied a shoelace and lassoed cushions. Kenneth and Patrick's mother still lived in the house. On the shelf were books like *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Little Women*, *Great Expectations*, the Jane Austens all bound in identical cloth covers as though she had purchased a set over the telephone. None appeared to have ever been opened.

I remained this way for five minutes, until Luke settled in front of the television set. Then I slipped out of the room, returned to the tent where Patrick and the girl had been dancing.

I arrived just as her tanned shoulders followed his down the garden path. They were easy to pursue—her dress a bright tangerine, popular that season. I remained twenty paces behind them, pausing now and then to examine a flower should they turn around. He was leading her down the driveway, toward a white Chrysler Imperial—his mother's car. At first I thought he would insert the key in the ignition and drive away with her. But instead, he sat in the driver's seat, she sat in the passenger's, and they started kissing.

I couldn't turn away. I didn't even hide—I stood in my marzipan-pink bridesmaid gown, five paces away, and watched through the passenger window. I half hoped they would spot me, so they would be forced to stop.

His palm crushed her perfect side-rolls into the car seat. Their lips sawed back and forth, their hands flapping over each other's bodies, as if they couldn't find purchase. The image of insects returned to me—they were devouring each other like animals who eat their own kind. Patrick jostled the taffeta up her legs and pushed his finger inside her underwear. The expression on his face remained neutral; he

looked more than anything like a dentist probing for a cavity. Which I guess he was. After ten minutes, the windows fogged over. I turned around.

At the church, Joan had worn a strapless gown with a train of tulle, but she'd changed into a cocktail dress for the reception—a champagne satin number with a neckline that scooped across her collarbone in two pleats. When I re-entered the tent, she was standing with a young man in a white suit.

There you are, she said, reaching for my hand.

Howie, this is my dear sister, Willa. Dear sister, meet Howie. A friend of Kenneth's from Cornell. You study what, again?

Chemistry.

How d'you do, I said, glancing back the way I had come, in case Patrick and the girl had re-emerged.

You care to dance?

I turned back to him with surprise. Joan squeezed my shoulder and floated to another pair of guests. I followed him onto the dance floor. He looked like a cricketer, clad all in white except the bowtie. He had black eyebrows that spanned his forehead from his temples to the bridge of his nose and shovel-shaped front teeth. His hands were oily. But he danced okay—he didn't yank me around the floor like boys at school. A caterer offered us two flutes of champagne. We downed them. My weight fell into his nicely; we shuffled with the music. I imagined Patrick admiring how well we moved—me with this older man, an Ivy League chemist. We danced two more songs before Joan cut in.

I didn't say you could hog her.

She reached for my waist as the song switched to Julie London's "Black Coffee." I let my weight shift from Howie to her. He winked and snatched another flute of champagne from a waiter's tray.

You having fun? she said.

Yes. Are you?

I'm very happy.

She looked it, a smile beating across her face. —Have you seen Mom?

Uh-oh.

She's fine.

She shuffled me around to face her. Mom had hiked her skirt to dance with Eugene. I wished, then, that Dad had made it. Last time he telephoned, he was in Hermosillo, Mexico. He wouldn't say what he was doing there. He phoned less and less now, though he still sent cards on our birthdays.

She hasn't said a word to Eveline, said Joan.

That's Eugene's ex-wife?

Mm-hm.

Then Joan pecked me on the forehead. We swayed back and forth. Neither of us led the other. We held something fragile between us, which guided our movement. I felt comforted by her warmth, her bodice damp under my palm, from her sweat or mine.

You'll take care of them, won't you? she said.

I didn't answer. The song changed. Eugene asked to dance with the bride, and I withdrew to the outer orbit of the floor. I was scanning the tent for Howie or the caterer with champagne when a hand touched my hip. Half his shirt was tucked into his cummerbund. He dropped his chin to my shoulder, in play fatigue.

Oh is it still going on? he said.

I paused under Patrick's weight, waited for him to lift his chin.

Your shirt's untucked, I said.

He touched my hand and guided us back to the dance floor.

You're awfully serious, he said.

He tapped my nose and traced the skin to my upper lip. He tapped again. I smelled a musk on his finger. A tangy, feminine musk. My eyes widened with comprehension. A smile unfolded across his

mouth. He tapped again.

1959—San Diego, California

I took a bus from the Santa Fe depot to La Jolla, where Joan and Kenneth lived in a white cube palace. Before the wedding, I'd never seen anything like it: a series of bleached shoeboxes designed in the thirties by an architect from L.A. I let myself in. Joan was expecting me, of course, but I wanted to surprise her. I was only there for the weekend—I didn't want to leave Luke alone for too long; he was taking exams that August to skip a grade. Patrick would be in town, I knew. I hadn't seen him since the wedding.

I couldn't help but compare our houses as I climbed the stairs. Our home in Victoria felt stuffy by contrast—even the names of its parts, like *widow's walk*, invoked thoughts of velvet and syrupy tea. Where ours was layered with gingerbread shingles, theirs was constructed from so much bright stucco even the palmetto bugs cast shadows. Our rooms were jammed with carpets, oil ink wallpaper, bony sofas. Their rooms were cool and open, with concrete floors and windows blue with ocean. Where we had yellow-painted gables and a corner tower, they had an L-shaped roof, tiled with brick, on which a table was set with a sun umbrella. The veranda in Victoria was bracketed with cornices, a view of our crowded yard, the cedar shrubs, a crabapple. Theirs opened with an arch, palm trees, a cement path to the road.

The guest room was on the second floor, I remembered. Mom and I had slept there for the wedding. One window pointed to the sea, the other North with a view of sand, palm trees, the neighbour's property in the distance. A third window slotted above the bed—too high and narrow to see out of, but funnelling light into the room, which had reflective walls like the rest of the house. A sisal rug filled the floor between the bed and dresser.

I went in search of Joan, softening my steps to preserve the quiet—the hush you hear inside conch shells, breeze whispering over tiles, the rock of the ocean. I found her on the living room floor, staring out the glass door that opened onto a sundeck. I recognized one of Mom's kimonos puddled around her lap.

Even in her clothes, she looked nothing like Mom—Joan’s forehead wider, brassy hair curled around her ears, where Mom’s had darkened and grown limp. She bent over a bowl of water with an electric fan, though the windows were open and the air felt cool inside. My shadow fell over the bowl and she turned, her eyes full. In a chaotic fluid motion, she leapt to her feet and pulled me into a muscular hug.

Willa, I’m so pleased you’re here. I haven’t slept a wink.

I felt a rush of affection for her and hugged her back.

Have you eaten? she said. It’s early. Let’s have breakfast. Do you like avocado? I can’t eat enough avocado. No—I have a better idea, we’ll eat out. There’s a wonderful roadside diner. None of the women from the club eat there; we’ll have privacy. What news do you bring? Any boys?

She said all of this as she linked her elbow around mine and tugged me down the hall, slipping her feet into white sandals with leather straps around the heels.

Shouldn’t you get dressed? I asked.

I’m wearing a top under this. I’ll put on shorts. No one will be there, she repeated.

She shuffled into the room at the end of the hall, continuing to chatter as if I were still with her.

I’ll wait downstairs, I called.

I relished the concrete under my feet as I padded down the steps. I paused in the dining room to roll up the light trousers I was wearing, so they appeared shorter, like pedal-pushers. I unbuttoned my cardigan and slung it over a wood chair. Then I saw him. He stood in the kitchen, glass of orange juice in his hand. His sudden physicality, yards away when I thought I had been alone in the room, made my breath skip.

He smiled as he sipped his orange juice, releasing two fingers from the glass in hello.

You frightened me, I said.

A thread of gooseflesh prickled my spine. He looked thinner than when I last saw him, but darker, his arms, face and neck tanned so evenly, the pigment might have seeped from an eroded liver. I knew it

had not. He was born of the beach, like Luke. Two boys with their plastic shovel. A sea cucumber they'd scooped from the foam, hurling the gelatinous green mass back to sea.

Joan whisked down the stairs in her white shorts. —There you are, she said. Then to Patrick:
When'd you get here?

Just now. Ken and I are meeting with a boat inspector before work.

It's not done yet?

He ignored her comment, restoring his gaze to mine.

Where do you work? I asked, though I knew.

A grocery store. You want to see the boat?

She can't, we're having breakfast, Joan said before I could reply.

He continued to watch me, as if she hadn't said anything.

Where will you be? I asked. Maybe we can join you after.

Dana Landing, said Patrick. Joan knows where.

Why don't we see how we feel after we eat? she said. She wiped her hand along the dining table without looking, somehow sensing her sunglasses were there, and slipped them onto her face. —Come on, let's beat traffic. The diner is a bit out of the way, I hope you don't mind. They fry the best eggs.

She locked her elbow around mine once more and guided me to the door. —Do you need sunglasses? You can borrow a pair of mine, if you like. I have a spare in the car.

Bye, Willa, said Patrick.

I glanced back as he set down his orange juice. He pulled each finger of his hand to crack his knuckles and watched us go.

Gosh, I said outside, dizzy with sun and lack of sleep. California made her faster, I observed. She talked faster. Walked faster. —You're really at home here, I said.

She gave me a half smile and checked her lipstick in the rear-view mirror. Her hands were trembling when she inserted the key into the ignition. She'd developed the tremors in high school. In public, she hid them by clasping her hands together or stuffing them in her pockets.

The diner was in a rough end of town, on the corner of two major boulevards. Even at ten on a Friday morning, the traffic slumped into town. The car beside ours had surfboards strapped to the roof rack, the car itself pink and unfurling—all the metal panels peeling off the frame. The passenger door was secured to the front seat with a bungee cord. A reflection of the surfboards crawled across the diner window as we pulled into the parking lot.

Grime mottled the pavement outside the restaurant, as if carhops regularly spilled milkshakes and hamburgers, pestling beef patties into the cement with their roller skates. Not many vehicles waited for car service, but the tables inside were packed with men in T-shirts, baseball caps, windbreakers with the collars popped. An older guy perched at the counter in a brown suit that might have fit him once but now sagged at his elbows. He read the newspaper, circling ads with a ballpoint pen. Near the entrance, a family sprawled at a table for four, the mother's hair lacquered into a blond shell, her plastic nails swiping her son's mouth, which appeared clean. Diners glanced at us as we passed. I trained my eyes on the backs of Joan's sandals.

She sunk into a booth at the back of the restaurant. I slid in opposite her. It was no use mentioning people were looking—she knew it. She opened the menu, but barely glanced at it before she searched her purse for cigarettes. She lit one with a matchbook from the china holder and blew the smoke at me through her nose.

I'm so fucking bored, Willa.

I scanned the neighbouring tables in case anyone had heard.

Oh, everyone curses here. She tapped her cigarette into an unused coffee cup. —You want to share the Hawaiian omelette?

She still hadn't looked over the menu. I closed mine and placed it back on the table.

Okay.

He wants kids, she said, as if picking up a conversation we'd had yesterday.

I emptied her cup into the ashtray. The cinders had marked a black streak on the rim. I rubbed it out with my thumb. —So?

She reached back into her handbag, digging through receipts and lozenge wrappers before finding what she was looking for. The contents rattled like breath mints when she placed the object on the table inside her closed fist. —You won't tell anyone.

No.

Not even Mom. She presented her baby finger.

I hooked mine around hers.

She opened her fist to reveal a brown glass pill bottle, the word "Enovid" on the label.

The waitress arrived with a pot of coffee. Joan flattened her palm back over the pill bottle.

She nudged her coffee cup to one side to decline. —Hawaiian omelette to share and a side of bacon, she said.

You bet, said the waitress, who looked pretty in her uniform. A red skirt bounced off her thighs. I must have looked like a high school student. A plastic headband crunched the bangs from my eyes, exposing the pimples on my forehead, the thick eyebrows Joan used to pluck for me, which I hadn't touched since she moved here.

You want anything else? Joan asked.

No, thanks.

Back in a flash, said the waitress, spiralling away in her skates.

Joan rotated the bottle between her finger and thumb, as if preparing to flick a crokinole disc across the table. —It prevents ovulation, she continued. Then her animation, which had felt forced to me, drained from her face.

I had read about Enovid—a woman had written in to the *Times Colonist* about the thousands of women suddenly claiming menstrual disorders so they could get a prescription. I still didn't know how it worked. The writer warned the effects would *imperil our daughters' morality*, but the letter was so thick with euphemisms, I flipped the page.

Are your cramps really bad?

No, you dumbbell.

You lied to the doctor?

Everyone lies to doctors. They're not ordained, you know.

They've gone to medical school.

God doesn't count medical school.

How do you know?

She slit her eyes at me. We fell silent.

Is it safe? I ventured after a moment.

She massaged her temple with the hand that held the cigarette, which grazed a strand of hair. —

Kenneth doesn't know.

I followed the ember in case the strand caught fire. —What do you mean, he doesn't know?

I wanted to see how my body would react first.

She continued to mash the cigarette butt with her thumb. —First we used condoms. But after his second year of dental school he stopped buying them.

You didn't talk about it?

He's impatient. He says people are asking.

But you don't want kids?

She shrugged, tucked the pill bottle in her purse.

He must have noticed you're not pregnant.

The waitress arrived with our omelette and a plate of sudsy bacon. We cleared our glasses to make room for the dishes in the centre.

He thinks I'm too thin, Joan said, piercing a pineapple wedge with her fork.

I sliced the omelette in half, lifted a yellow slab onto my side plate.

I'm scared, Willa. What if the pills don't work? My friend Sheila got some too, and now she's pregnant. Maybe she skipped a day. Or changed her mind. I don't know.

She sipped my coffee without asking.

I reached for her wrist on the table and lay my palm overtop. I knew she didn't want me to respond with words. She only needed me to hear her—to share the burden of her secret. I bit the end of a bacon strip and sucked it in my mouth. My mind kept wandering to Patrick. How I would like to visit him at the marina—to see the yacht.

*

That night, Kenneth watched the news on their hideaway TV, which could be tucked back into a wood cabinet.

Hi, I said, considering whether to sit beside him on the sofa. The news anchor announced the completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway in a monotone that made me think nothing could be less interesting than the St. Lawrence Seaway—it must be the most dull of all seaways, though I couldn't name another just then. What was a seaway anyway? I thought the St. Lawrence was a river.

How are you liking California? he said.

I've always liked it, I said.

The seaway, the anchor droned, was a system of locks, canals and channels, which made me wonder, next, what was a lock, and what was the difference between a canal and a channel?

Good, said Kenneth.

When I first met him, he hovered between two age groups—half adult, half Patrick’s brother. My uncertainty about how to treat him led me to avoid our encounters. I experienced that stiffness acutely now.

Patrick mentioned you’re repairing Eugene’s yacht, I said. When will she be ready?

Oh, there’s a lot of work to do yet, he said, his eyebrows bunching toward the crooked bridge of his nose. —She’s been wallowing in that bay for eight years.

Does Patrick help with repairs?

When he can. He works most weekends.

Is he working tomorrow?

That’s right.

He reached for his drink, allowed the ice to plink in the glass before lifting it to his lips. He had a long face, crescent-shaped, his cheeks brown though he spent all that time back East. He looked more than five years older than Patrick. His high forehead made his hairline appear receded, but it wasn’t. The line had always dipped across his head with the hollows of an M.

Say, do you have a road map I could borrow?

Sure. There’s one in Joan’s glove compartment.

How about a bicycle? I saw a bicycle outside.

That’s my old one. It would be big for you.

But I can use it?

Knock yourself out.

The next day, I asked Joan to give me a grocery list. I drew a blue line from her house to the supermarket on the road map. The distance between the seat and pedals on Kenneth's bicycle made my legs plod like a deep-sea diver's in a bell suit, but I got used to it. Everyone on the street looked hypnotized: the dog-walkers, the mailman, even the pastel convertibles tucked to the curb.

The market was immaculate—a bright store with checkered floors, the shelves dizzy with labels all pointed the same way. I rarely shopped in big stores in Victoria—you could get everything you needed from the corner market. Who would eat all this? There must be twenty jars of grape jelly and twenty plastic bears of honey and twenty bottles of maple syrup. Maple syrup was not on Joan's list, but I took a bottle to test if an employee would appear to fill the hole. I added a honey bear too. Then I stuck a grape jelly where the honey bear should be and the honey bear in the row of grape jelly.

Patrick stood behind the meat counter. A cardboard display blocked his view of me—it contained stacks of cookie boxes under tented paper bunting. The sign said *Cookie Parade* with a drawing of a clown in a ruffled collar. Nine black elephants ran along the bottom of the display. I watched Patrick through a gap in the boxes. He was serving a woman who looked richer than Joan. Her hair had been sculpted into a shell on top of her head with these spouts where crabs might nestle if they didn't suffocate from her aerosol spray-net.

He spread a sheet of brown paper on the scale and weighed two chicken breasts. He transferred the paper to the counter and smoothed the breasts one on top of the other, folded the paper over and tucked in the sides. He passed the parcel to the woman and she turned, her pumps clicking toward me along the linoleum.

When I glanced back at Patrick, he was watching me through the gap in the cookie boxes. I jumped.

Are you hiding from me? he asked, loud enough for the woman to hear.

No.

I approached the meat counter and directed my gaze toward a length of salami in the case. Joan had not written salami on the list either.

What are you doing here? he said.

The smock was too big for him. He looked like a boy dressed as a ghost. But a tanned ghost with eyes like two glass fishing floats. His apron was smeared with meat juice.

Joan gave me a list, I said.

Does she want salami?

No.

I fished the list from my pocket and flattened the paper against my palm. —Figs, I said.

You won't find those at the meat counter.

I guess not.

You want me to show you?

Okay.

He thwacked off his gloves and came out from behind the glass case. He probably wasn't supposed to leave the counter unattended, or to visit the produce aisle with blood on his apron, but I didn't object.

Figs are funny, aren't they? he said as we walked. —Do you know where the word "sycophant" comes from?

I shook my head. I didn't even know what the word "sycophant" meant. His shoes were distracting me. The wood soles clacked across the linoleum more sharply than the woman's pumps. My sandals padded in silence.

It comes from the Greek *sykophantes*, he said, which means "who shows the fig," a vulgar hand gesture.

We had reached the Mission fig case. He cupped one in his palm, which had not touched the chicken directly, but maybe he should have washed his hands. The fruit looked intimate to me—its soft weight in his palm, skin the purple of blood pooling. He touched the fig to his chin before he bit. Another employee pushed a tray of bananas into the aisle. I stepped away to scan the artichokes, but Patrick stayed where he was. He lifted the hand with the half-eaten fig and waved.

When the employee passed, Patrick rammed the rest of the fig in his mouth.

How many do you want? he asked, the seeds wedged between his teeth. He flicked a plastic bag from the roll and began tossing figs inside.

I don't know, I said. The list didn't specify a number. —Seven?

You want artichokes too? He tore a second bag and began filling it with the green globes.

Okay.

Take them, he said, handing me both bags.

I set them inside the basket.

No. I mean *take them*. He wagged his middle and index fingers upside down to indicate a walking man. —Outside.

Without paying?

Who will notice?

I looked around. The employee who'd passed was restocking bananas at the bottom of the aisle.

Is this a trap?

He slung his arm around my shoulder and walked me toward the front doors. —What else is on your list? Do you like chocolate? We sell these bars imported from Switzerland.

We were approaching another display: a fibreboard cut-out of the Alps rose above a pyramid of chocolate bars. Patrick slid one off the top.

See? he said. The bar was wrapped in gold card. He tapped it against his mouth.

You ever wonder if we're twins? he said.

His tone remained even. He stared beyond me in the distracted way he often did. This time, at the Alps.

That's a funny thing to ask, I said. We have different mothers.

So?

He reached for my basket and guided me to release it into his hands.

I've been learning about twins in my psychology class, he said. When a mother gives birth to one child, her gaze finds her newborn instinctively. But in the case of twins, there are two faces. Two sets of eyes. Which one does she look at?

Both of them?

You can't split your gaze. Not evenly.

We walked toward the front doors. He spoke in a gentle voice. —So her gaze slips to the twin most aligned with her looks or temperament. Even if she imagines the resemblance. The other child is the shadow.

We were outside. He slid the artichokes, figs, maple syrup and chocolate bar into my backpack.

But we have different mothers, I said again.

He rested the pack against my ankles. —You're distracting me, he said. You'll get me in trouble.

But you're the one—

He raised his finger to his mouth. —Later, 'gator.

He glided back inside the store, the wire basket swinging from his arm.

I had leaned Kenneth's bike against the wall of the supermarket. I returned to it now, the pack sagging from my elbow. I slung it over my shoulder and walked the bike out of the parking lot. As I lifted my leg over the seat, I saw Joan from the corner of my eye. She weaved between the cars in white shorts and Mom's kimono.

There you are, she said.

What are you doing here?

Picking you up.

But I cycled.

We'll stick the bike in the trunk, she said. I have an idea.

I didn't get everything on the list, I said.

That's okay.

What's your idea?

We'll visit Sheila.

But it's dinnertime.

So?

We can't drop in unannounced.

Says who?

Joan.

Don't you want to see her house?

No.

It's ten minutes from here tops.

*

We left the convertible at the market. I followed her to the main road. After two blocks, we turned onto a street named after an oil like rapeseed or canola. The sun began to set as we walked into another neighbourhood with trim squares of grass and clean cars. Date palms reared from the yards, the fronds more thready and sinister than the trees along the boulevard. A knot of shadow scuttled across the road—maybe an opossum. Joan told me more about Sheila as we walked: her palatial garden with flowers like pink honey cakes, orange trees.

She could stand in front of a disembowelled coyote and still look like a wife from the Sears catalogue, she said.

Walking with my sister like this, in secret or daring, reminded me of an incident when I was seven, in Victoria. We had trespassed into a house roped off by police—the windows boarded with planks of wood, which called to mind bandages wrapped around somebody’s eyes, effacing that essential part of them. Behind the planks, a window was broken, and we slipped through, a fragment of glass slicing my knee. Today a scar still sickles my kneecap. The hall smelled of body odour and feces, the air thickening as we approached the kitchen, where coils of dog poo scattered the tiles. I had never seen a home like this, the plaster blotched with damp, maybe urine, cups in the sink lined with fetid tea and cigarette ash, tins of beans rusting on the counter. The walls represented a cage, not a shelter, and that realization changed me. I couldn’t shake the impression we had violated a sacred space. The house wasn’t in our neighbourhood: I knew nothing about the man who lived there. But I felt certain we had defiled him.

Despite the anxiety in my gut, I followed Joan down the street. I felt stronger with her by my side—part of some larger organism. We strode hand in hand down this street named after oil. The air smelled of fried garlic and oregano.

It’s the next one, she said.

The houses grew in size and splendour as we walked. The one she stopped at was a Victorian like ours at home, though much grander—painted butter yellow with a frieze of detail under the cupola, the cornices above the front door carved with sunbursts. Under the bay window, they had raked a strip of garden that grew prickly pear and kettles of sage, and in the next bed, a mass of greedy dahlias. The light in the window was on. I searched for movement or a shadow, but it was useless from that angle. Joan cut across the lawn and stepped into the window garden bed, picking her way over paddles of cactus. She stopped at the edge of the window and pressed against the wall. My heart beat in my throat. I expected the door to swing open any moment. I inched after her along the shadow of a tree. The prickly pear snagged my shorts. I paused to unhook myself and the thorn pricked my thumb. Joan squatted under the window

and couldn't see a thing. I was distant enough to catch the silver light of a TV against the wall. I rose higher onto my knee and spotted a woman at a long table, her hair dyed a sherry tone. She wore a thick gold coil necklace that circled her throat like a snake, widening into a heavy pendant on her breastbone. She did not watch the television, which continued to rinse the wall in sterling light. A bowl of what look like tapioca pudding sat beside her elbow.

Is she there? asked Joan.

Let's go.

What's going on?

She's reading.

Wait till you see the backyard.

She stepped over a cactus and led the way around the side of the house.

I didn't feel as guilty when I saw how much money they must have. The lawn was dotted with Italian cherub statues. Fleshy begonias circled the grass, which was shaded by a pergola at the back. A mass of trumpet flowers wound through the wood lattice and gave the impression of life, as if the plants were expanding and contracting with oxygen.

Can we go now?

Joan pressed her face against the back window, stepping away only when she breathed a cloud of breath onto the pane, obscuring her view.

She announced the pregnancy at our bridge club, she said. You should have seen their faces.

Simply marvellous, Doris said like a twit. How can you be *simply* marvellous?

I rested my palm on Joan's back and guided her back toward the front garden. When we reached the stone path that led to the driveway, she said, Let's knock on her door.

Joan.

Five minutes.

She jogged up the front steps and rapped the door with her fist. A housekeeper answered almost immediately. She recognized Joan and showed us into the dining room, where the elegant woman sat with her book. Her hand-block print dress appeared to me expensive yet understated—something you'd overlook until you saw it in *Vogue*.

Joan, said Sheila, glancing at her wristwatch. —Am I expecting you?

No, and we won't stay a minute. I wanted to introduce you to my sister, Willa. We were just around the corner.

I was annoyed at her for using me as an excuse, but curtsied. The gesture felt ridiculous in my shorts.

Sheila's gaze lingered on our thighs. —Have you been to the beach?

No. Ken and I have been at the marina all week. The yacht will be seaworthy soon. Once we replace the engine.

How nice, she said, before turning to me. —It's wonderful to meet you, Willa. You'll stay for a drink, won't you? Ginger ale okay?

We'd love a ginger ale, wouldn't we, Will?

Sheila smiled, but made no move to stand.

Where's Ned? asked Joan.

He golfs late Saturdays.

Ah.

A silence followed. I wanted to fill it. I considered complimenting her garden, but realized all gardens must thrive here. San Diegans didn't even talk about the weather unless it rained.

Still no one spoke.

Your dahlias are thriving, I said.

In truth, dahlias disturbed me—the perfect spheres, opening in hundreds of symmetrical cells, like an alien apartment block. Or worse, mouths tiered on top of each other, pristine tongues snapping from each fluted lip.

Isn't she sweet, said Sheila.

Willa's starting college this September. Aren't you, Will?

Yes. I hope to study classics.

How nice, said Sheila. We have the Brontës on our bookshelf.

I mean Roman classics.

Oh. We have those too.

You do? Which ones?

You'll have to ask Ned.

She still hadn't stood to fetch the ginger ale or invited us to sit down.

Big news, huh? said Joan. Congratulations again.

Sheila lowered the book to her lap and spread her fingers over the spine. —Thank you.

You know what I'm going to ask, said Joan.

Sheila smiled faintly, stroking the spine of the book. I sensed she wanted us to leave, and I glanced at Joan, who ignored me.

The pills. Did you stop?

Sheila's eyes flicked to me. When I met her glance, she smiled uneasily.

Oh Willa doesn't matter, said Joan. Anyway, if the pills don't work I should know.

I clasped my sister's wrist, as if to hiss in her ear, though I addressed Sheila instead. —I'm sorry Mrs. ...

I curtsied again, in spite of myself, and tugged Joan toward the doorway.

They work fine, if that's all you want to know.

Shei, I want to know whatever you'll tell me.

Ned will be home soon. If you don't mind, I'll see you out. She rose from her chair, and the edges of her shoulders speared past us into the hall. Joan hastened after her, and I followed, faintly stunned, uncertain if I should apologize again. We stepped onto the porch. I turned to wave, but Sheila had already shut the front door.

Joan descended the steps and stomped across the lawn, kicking grass where she shouldn't, muddying her toes. She paused below a streetlamp, unlit cigarette between her lips. Her fingers couldn't grip the match because they trembled so much. I cupped my hands around hers to steady them. Eventually, her tendons released into my palms. She bent to light the match.

Witch, she said as she whistled a stream of smoke through her mouth. I hugged my arm around her hip. We walked back to the car.

That night, back at the house, I found her on the veranda, scribbling in her diary. I was about to turn around when she reached her hand for me.

Stay, she said. I want to show you something.

She set her pen on the armrest of the chair and fanned the pages back. She opened to a newspaper article she had pasted onto a blank sheet, the edges folded so they would not wing out from the cover and tear.

What is it? I asked.

She passed me the diary. The story was about an incident that occurred that year in Washington State. That was the word Joan used. "Incident." In the incident, a mother of five children drowned her youngest in a bathtub.

The article said she had sunk into a bad depression with every birth. She asked to be sterilized after the third—she couldn't bear more pregnancies and she knew it. But the obstetrician discouraged her, said she would feel better in a few weeks. The husband promised to get a vasectomy, but he never got around to it. Like he never got around to oiling the door hinges or rewiring the TV set so the picture didn't

slur. All reports—from schoolteachers, neighbours, the pastor—confirmed the children were well cared for. When she recovered from labour, she devoted herself to them. But after the fifth child, the ligaments that fastened her mind together released.

That would be me, Joan whispered as we sat outside, our deck chairs facing the waves, which feathered toward us as the tide drew in. She folded the edges of the clipping back inside her diary.

Nonsense, I said. You will make a wonderful mother when you're ready.

She shook her head. —Mom has it too, she said. You don't. You got away lucky.

Slung between the pillars of the boat hoist, *Greta* looked ungainly—sixty-two feet in length, sixteen across, the hull itself nearly eight—like an island pried from the earth so you see its undercarriage. It felt rude somehow, witnessing the parts that sliced through water. Patrick told me she was built from B.C. Douglas fir. When the Central American treasure-hunting expedition failed, she picked up other work—fishing, guano, cameos in silent films. I still didn't understand how Eugene came into such a vessel, or why he left it there to rot. I guess it wouldn't be the first expensive item he abandoned in California. There was the house. His ex-wife. He probably wouldn't talk to his kids if one hadn't married Mom's daughter.

Kenneth worked with his shirt off. He scraped the algae from the sides, chiselled the decay. The muscles purred in his shoulders as he filled a hole with resin.

It doesn't look seaworthy to me, I said to Joan from the pavement.

It will be. Once they replace the engine.

How much does one of them cost?

Less than a new yacht, I guess.

While Kenneth worked, Patrick clambered onto the tire of the boat hoist and tossed himself onto *Greta's* stern. Yards above us, he removed a handkerchief from his shorts and wiped his hands. No one scolded him, though the yacht hung over the concrete yard, and he could slip and splinter his head open or get strung up by the hoist's chains.

Hey, Patrick, why don't you show me the beach? I called.

He tipped his arms overhead as if to dive off the yacht, then smeared his jaw open to mimic the impact and let his arms wilt above his head, which had dropped to one side as if his neck had snapped. Neither Kenneth nor Joan took any notice.

*

Guano, he told me, is seabird shit, valued by farmers for its high nitrogen, phosphate and potassium content.

The tide was out. We were walking along the sand at Mission Beach. He had bought me a soft-serve ice cream from a truck on the boulevard. It smelled sour, of milk not cleaned from the machine. No matter how fast I licked, pearls unlatched and dripped to my wrist.

Cave bats too, he said. It's lucrative.

The shit.

Yes.

We had left Joan and Kenneth at the marina. Patrick's funny mood continued. He strode faster than I could with my ice cream, then turned suddenly to face me. A cloud of sand lifted as I tripped to a halt, my nose inches from his throat. He smelled of talcum powder.

You still swim? he asked.

Sure.

You could dive, too. I remember that.

We were silent.

I don't have a swim costume with me.

Me neither, he said.

The beach was busy but not packed. Behind us, an egg timer dinged and a row of women rolled onto their stomachs. Down the sand, surfers had erected a fortress of red boards. A girl chased her brother with a pail of water, and for an instant I missed Luke—wondered if he was still studying, or if his friends had persuaded him to fish on the gorge. God knows, Mom wouldn't stop him.

Patrick and I walked in silence. Ahead, a woman rubbed oil on her calves. Her boyfriend tossed a football in the air, caught it idly with one hand. In the water, a girl my age floated on a surfboard, her feet

kicking the tide, waves rocking her forward. Then all my fancies of California flooded back—the gold beating bodies, svelte palm trees, not one hair of cloud in the sky, which enfolded everything in sonorous blue.

It's really nice to see you, I said.

He didn't turn his head, but I could tell he was smiling. Then he stopped short again and grabbed my hand.

Your ice cream is melting, he said.

I could feel the cold beads rolling down my knuckle.

I presented my fist, daring him to lick it. He leaned nearer, his stare holding mine. Then his tongue darted and struck the heel of my palm.

You want the rest? I asked.

Something stirred in me when he took my ice cream and guided the entire cone into his mouth. He reached for my hand to wipe the cream with his handkerchief when something caught his eye. His fingers clamped my wrist and he steered our path to the shoreline. He knelt abruptly, forcing me to stoop over him, and dipped my fist in the tide. He removed a Bakelite nail brush from his pocket and pried my hand open under water. The bristles jabbed under each nail as he slid the brush back and forth over my fingertips. I stared at him, too stunned to pull away, the brush nipping the sensitive skin at the end of each finger.

After a moment he started back toward the boardwalk. I followed at a distance, tucking my swollen fingers inside my pocket, scared to check whether the sunbathers had seen. The back of his white T-shirt was translucent from patches of sweat. When we reached the marina, I saw damp had also spread across his thigh, where he'd replaced the brush in the pocket of his shorts. In my own pocket, a hot moistness fell from my index finger.

*

That night, I ventured into the kitchen while Joan tore lettuce with her bare hands for salad. It looked satisfying—this wringing of leaves, water spraying her arms as the spines ruptured. A cast-iron pot sputtered on the stove, steam dislodging the lid with bursts of moisture.

Can I help?

She had changed into blue cigarette trousers, an embroidered apron around her waist. I had never seen her cook in my life.

Could you turn that burner down? she said.

She wiped her palms on her apron and shifted to the cutting board, scooped a handful of cherry tomatoes from a paper bag. She sliced each tomato in half and tossed them in the bowl with the salad. I found the right dial on the stove and rotated it down.

I'm heating the cassoulet from last night, I hope that's okay.

What kind of casserole?

She smiled, wiped her hands once more on her apron. —It's a French stew.

Ever since their honeymoon in Paris, she deferred to France in her lifestyle—ordering ballet flats from the Champs-Élysées when she could buy them here, subscribing to *Marie Claire*, which she left stacked in the guest bathroom.

Pour yourself a drink if you want, she said. There's lemonade and Coca-Cola in the fridge.

We rarely had Coca-Cola at home, so I opened a bottle, hovered it under my nose to feel the gas spritz my lip.

She started talking again about the yacht repairs. —It's not just the cost of the engine, she said. They would have to pay for installation. Kenneth can't do that himself. Do you know how much an engine weighs? And they have to haul out the old one.

Somehow more sand had wormed inside my thumbnail. I stopped listening to Joan and focused on sucking the grains between my teeth. He had carried a nail brush with him—how long had he wanted

to do this? I clenched the dried blood in my fist so Joan wouldn't see. The bristles had opened the cuticle of my index finger. Then I noticed she had stopped mixing the salad and stood rotated to me as if she'd asked a question.

Sorry, what?

Did you have a nice time with Patrick?

I searched the kitchen window for something else to comment on. It sounded so minor when I worded it to myself. *He tried to clean my nails.* Ahead, two seagulls collided above the porch umbrella. They did not screech like most seagulls wrangling over a crust of bread. Maybe they were mating. It looked violent—the whole sex act a theatre of impaling, the stronger sex goring the other with his knife.

He bought me an ice cream, I said.

That's nice.

I closed my eyes to feel the last prickle of carbonation on my lip.

Do you like him?

He's okay.

You can tell him to back off, you know.

I've had boyfriends before, Joan. I know what to do.

He's your boyfriend?

The blood flushed my cheeks. —That's not what I meant.

So he bought you an ice cream, she said. What else?

I shrugged. —He did something strange.

How so?

He cleaned my nails.

I didn't tell her how, exactly. That he pried my fist open under water, pressed the bristles so hard the skin broke. As I replayed the scene to myself, I started to question details—maybe he hadn't scrubbed

so hard. Maybe he caught a hangnail. Or the whole episode was a joke. A bizarre joke, one I didn't get, but he'd always been unusual.

What do you mean?

Never mind. It sounds silly now.

Did he say they were dirty?

He had a nail brush. I don't want to talk about it.

She paused, knife poised above the cutting board. —Maybe he developed an aversion to germs at college. Those places are cesspools.

It doesn't matter. Shall I set the table?

She pedalled her knife through a cucumber. —Sheila's aunt had a germ phobia. Oh it sounded awful. They had to tether her to the bed so she wouldn't wash her hands in Clorox. The skin pimples off her bones like a sunburn.

She glanced at me for a reaction. I bent to remove three plates from the oven.

Probably the whole thing was a joke, I said.

After dinner, I sat on the windowsill of the guest bedroom and gazed at the night between the palm trees. I would take the train home tomorrow, and the thought made me uneasy. I could feel the future encroach as a shadow encroaches on a day when you spend every hour outside and fail to notice the sun slipping below the horizon. At college, I would study Latin and classical literature—but to what end? My friends had enrolled to meet husbands—two were engaged already. I wasn't like them. More and more, it fell on me to prepare dinner, to help Luke with his homework, which he completed while I worked through my readings in the kitchen. It was crucial to me that we both secured the highest grades: to prove we were different from our mother, that we had some claim on goodness, which she had rejected for herself but which she could not damage in us. That was how I perceived it. *Goodness* would elevate us from the house in Victoria, from the island. But at what point, exactly, would my grades convert to freedom?

Ninety percent for an essay on the relationship between madness and blindness in *King Lear* would do me as much good as sixty if both futures required a husband. Less good, if I continued to decline dates.

Did Patrick want a wife?

I reached for the backpack on the floor and removed the bar of chocolate we stole. I rearranged myself on the sill, legs folded outside. The palms looked spidery in darkness. The nearest one was shaggy, the fronds peeling from the canopy to form an undercarriage. I read that's how they grew—as old fronds sag, new leaves sprout from the top, and the trunk elongates, leaving tracks of scars around the stem, or a hairy underbelly, which reflects the live fronds as if separated by a pool of water. On one side the fronds arced from the canopy like fingers spread to let in sunlight. On the other, they drooped and grew brittle, rustling like parchment. The shaggy palm contained this duality, life on one side, death on the other, the two halves separated by a line that receded as the trunk grew taller, sturdier, and so like us, the older the trees grew, the more dead years they dropped behind them. Unlike us, you could see the trajectory, the lived years, the fronds bracketing around the trunk like a layered skirt, until they clacked off onto the pavement. The second tree was much neater, the trunk reedy and smooth, dead fronds wrapped in a parcel under the canopy—or were those new fronds? I couldn't tell.

I opened a hole in the foil wide enough to snap off a triangle of chocolate. I sucked the morsel until it softened on my tongue.

Maybe Patrick was on to something. We were twins. I had shadowed Joan all this time. He had shadowed Kenneth. The funny thing about shadows is they absorb each other. You can't see where one ends and another begins.

Greta

In July 1961, Joan invited me to go sailing. I had completed my second year at Victoria College. Patrick had finished his fourth at Cornell. They planned to sail her down the coast of Baja California, or as far as they could over the holiday. Fourth of July was a Tuesday, but Kenneth had booked the whole weekend free. Joan paid my train fare.

I remembered the schooner they owned—the yacht, I would call it—how I might look on the deck of their yacht. How it would feel to dive into slippery water. I imagined us eating breakfast, two couples with Pacific-tanned cheeks, orange juice on the table. How jealous my best friend would be in Victoria—even if she had a steady boyfriend who proposed regularly and zipped her up island in his MG. I would come back tanned, pimples smoothed from salt.

I called her to say I was taking the train to visit my sister in California, that I would spend Fourth of July weekend on my brother-in-law's yacht. Lucky you, she'd said. I don't have any sisters who marry rich men with yachts. Then she told me her boyfriend knew a secret spot to watch the Dominion Day fireworks. He was taking her in the MG, she might let him keep going this time.

She didn't know I had let Patrick "keep going." But I didn't feel prepared by our time on the island that summer. If anything, I felt more chaste. My belly had stayed hard. If it's so easy—if a man need only breathe the wrong way, and I'd let him erupt inside me—I must be good. I didn't realize, at first, you needed to bleed.

I didn't think about that night too often. I thought about the week we met the brothers when I got stung by the jellyfish. Later that evening, after Eugene had struck his knuckles with a belt, Patrick came to my room. I was lying under my bed, reading Nancy Drew with Dad's Kwik-Lite flashlight. Patrick crawled under the bed with me. When he straightened his legs, his feet poked from the end of the bed frame, but when he bent them, his kneecaps pushed the wood slats. I closed my book. He reached for my flashlight and switched it off. We lay in silence. When I tried to slide out, he found my hand and pressed my wrist to the floor. He said: Are you my wife? I told him I didn't think so. I tried to pry off his fingers. After a while,

he relaxed his grip. I breathed in hot air that smelled like corn from his mouth. Eventually it started to feel nice, like we were holding hands.

When I think of us in 1961, before we launched the yacht into the water, an image returns to me: my sister in shorts, opal earrings that greened in sunlight, me with trousers hiked over my knees, two bronzed boys rinsing the hull with water, all of our palms pressed to the wood, as if feeling for a pulse.

1961—San Diego, California

It would have made a nice picture: the boys' shirts folded on a cockpit bench though the sun had barely pushed into the horizon, their abdomens knitted as they yanked the halyard, a great bank of canvas hoisting into the sky, the sisters watching from the foredeck, the one tall, a chamomile blouse tucked into the waistband of her shorts, the other small, dark hair undulating in the breeze that mounted as the yacht putted into the bay.

We had arrived that morning with paper cups of coffee from a roadside diner. Patrick met us at the marina parking lot and the four of us trekked the cooler and food boxes to the dock, duffels slung over our shoulders or swinging from hands, piling them on the walkway with the cans of motor oil and life preservers. Joan and I packed the items below deck, tucking food into the galley lockers in containers, so if we opened a door while under way, tins of tuna wouldn't slash out and clobber our heads. There were five cabins—two doubles at the stern, by the engine, two singles at the bow, and a double amidships, in front of the galley. Joan chose one of the doubles at the stern for herself and Kenneth. Patrick had already settled into middle cabin, so I selected one of the singles at the bow. The berth was narrow, more like a bench, with wood cabinets underneath for my clothes. But I didn't mind feeling the edges of things. I had a large porthole.

We watched in silence as the boys tugged lines and hoisted more sails into the air. I studied their motions. I wanted Patrick to see me raise a sail on my own. To show him I knew the names of things. I had started to memorize certain terms: *spar*, *bowsprit*, *jib*, *boom*. The sounds hung in my mouth, severed from the object they represented, as when you learn any language. Each corner of the sail had a name, for example, and to remember I shut my eyes and imagined the right triangles in Luke's geometry text. *Head*, *tack* and *clew*. The head was easy—that was the top corner—the tack and clew I confused. As for the

sides: the bottom of the sail was called the “foot,” the forward edge, the “luff,” and the hypotenuse, if I may call it that, the “leech.”

I took a particular interest in Kenneth’s nautical chart, which reminded me of the charts Dad had pinned to the wall at the beach house. I knew a bit on how to read them. I noted the water depths, coastal landmarks and buoys, so we could track our progress toward Ensenada. Every now and then, Joan said something to me as she watched the boys, but her voice was absorbed by the whipping canvas. Then Patrick tightened the main sheet, the sails filled, and we cut across the bay with only the creak of the boom, water rinsing the sides and the sound of air swelling into cloth.

Eventually, Joan opened the latest *Marie Claire* and I folded myself onto a cockpit bench with Kenneth’s binoculars. We hooked out of the bay and drifted south, passed the Old Point Loma Lighthouse. Beyond Point Loma, the high-rises of downtown lifted into view, a grubby ivory colour against the harsh white of the lighthouse. But I found them pleasingly grubby, as if seen through a sheet of warm gauze. And beyond the skyline, scabby hills, so unlike the wet, green mountains I was used to.

After the first hour we fell into an uncertain rhythm—Kenneth and Patrick hovering over the helm, fearful the other would take over, occasionally trimming a sail to prevent it from luffing, Joan flipping through her magazine a second time, me leaning over the side of the vessel, watching the wake we lay behind us. The hours since I’d arrived in California had slipped by rapidly. I imagined it like dropped knitting, the yarn unwinding across the floor before the momentum faded and the ball rocked to a halt. What now? What did you actually *do* on a yacht? I’d brought Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, which I had to read for my only modern literature class in September. Starting that year, Victoria College would offer bachelor’s degrees under guidance from the University of British Columbia. I had decided to stay on, unlike most of my friends, who graduated that summer with a diploma. But I couldn’t read on the boat—an anxious energy thrummed through me. Patrick had barely glanced at me all morning. At first I thought he was distracted with getting under way, but he had time now, didn’t he? I left the binoculars on my chair and practised walking from one end of the boat to the other, arms out for

balance as we heeled to one side. I wondered, not for the first time, why Eugene hadn't sailed the yacht to Victoria. He could have found mooring space in Oak Bay. Did it mean he was planning to come back here? With Mom or without her?

When I reached the bow without stumbling, I looped back to the boys at the helm.

How's it all going? I asked.

Patrick shaded his eyes and gazed over my shoulder at the water. Kenneth grinned at me and clapped his palm on my arm.

Isn't she a beaut?

Yes. She's built from trees very near where I'm from.

Is that right, he said, his tone polite but disengaged.

Would you like more coffee? I said, staring at Patrick.

I'd love a cup, thanks, Will, said Kenneth.

Patrick nodded once at me. I turned for the companionway steps.

Joan had packed one of those Italian moka pots, similar to one we used to bring camping, so I knew to fill the basin with water and spoon coffee into the metal filter, then tighten the upper chamber so the coffee didn't bubble out the sides. I had been bracing myself against the counter with my hip, but when *Greta* pitched to the other side, I lurched into the stove, which itself was gimbaled so it stayed upright. I lowered myself onto the settee and focused on a grain of sugar on the table to avoid feeling sick.

I waited for the coffee to chortle, then splashed it into four cups, which I carried painstakingly up the companionway steps on a breakfast tray. Kenneth had left Patrick at the helm and was trying to lift Joan off the bench. She stood without his help and stepped onto the deck. He followed her, slinging both arms around her waist. She leaned away from him, lay her hands over his and separated them from her hips. I pressed my knee into a bench to steady myself and waited for them to reach for their coffees so I wouldn't have to manoeuvre the tray over the cockpit coaming. Then I joined Patrick at the helm.

Thanks, he said, when I passed him the mug.

You're welcome. I cupped mine in both palms, inhaling the scent of roasted beans, allowing it to calm my nerves, scanning my nails without meaning to for grains of dirt.

Do you want to try steering? he asked.

Oh, may I? Will you show me how?

He downed half of his coffee—it had cooled from the breeze—and set it on the bench. It began to slide. I grabbed it in time and set it on the deck, where it remained stationary, though angled. He took my coffee, which I hadn't finished, and placed it beside his. Then he stood behind me, guided my hands onto the wood spokes of the wheel, and tightened his palms around my fists. He pushed gently to the right, and I felt my hands take the weight of the boat, which began to point starboard. Then he guided my hands toward the left, just a hair, and we resumed our course. He stood so close behind me I could smell the oils from his skin, the coffee on his breath, which tickled my ear. He tightened his grip over my hands, encouraging me to massage the wood, and then I felt him from behind, or I thought I did, a hardness prodding my tailbone. I resisted the instinct to flinch away and chose to relax into his hips, which pressed against me. After several long moments, he stepped back. I lifted my cup from the deck, passed his also, training my gaze on the blue ceramic rims. When I raised my eyes to his, he smiled—at my calm or his arousal, I couldn't tell. For a long time, neither of us blinked.

Willa, called Joan. Dolphins.

I stepped away from Patrick and strode toward my sister near the bow. When I reached her, the dolphins had dipped back under, but I studied the water with great concentration to avoid glancing back at him. The animals crested again a few minutes later, thirty yards from the boat, two dorsal fins carving the waves like teaspoons slicing through melon.

I felt pleased with my new swim costume—peach coloured with buttons down the bust and a low back. When I tested it at Cadboro Bay, the boys had noticed. One hauled me in the water and dunked my head.

Even my best friend's boyfriend looked. I'd felt nervous about my breasts at first, whether they would slip from the sides. But so far everything remained tucked.

As the sun roasted higher in the sky, I arranged myself on a cockpit bench beside Joan. She wore a dusty-blue two-piece that exposed her midriff. I rolled onto my stomach to emphasize the cut of my own suit. The knit tulipped my bum. Sun spooled across my shoulders. Kenneth was back at the helm, and Patrick was sitting cross-legged on the aft deck. His eyes followed the sun down my spine, to where the nylon cut across my buttocks, down my legs, which goose-pimpled. Then my foot started to cramp. I tried to wriggle my toes without disturbing the stillness of my posture. Finally, I pressed my foot on the bench to relax it. I removed my sunglasses and lay back down on my stomach, nestling my nose in my forearms. I glanced at him once, from this angle. The quality of his gaze had shifted—as if he were not admiring my physique but trying to enter it, to suck up everything I knew, hold every thought in his hands. The quality of his attention disturbed me—but I focused on the fact of it, which surrounded me in a light not as pure as the sun, maybe, but like one of those heat lamps.

He was holding an empty water glass. He pressed the glass upside down over the deck like in the game where you ask a question and wait for the ghost to jerk the cup across the table—left for yes, right for no. If he let go of the glass, it would coast straight into the toe rail.

Smell this, he called.

And I saw there was an insect in the glass—a cockroach or palmetto bug.

I rolled off my bench and joined him on deck. He lifted the cup. The insect released a rank odour like rotten fruit. And it looked like rotten fruit. An oily date with stubbled legs and TV antennae. Patrick set down a sugar cube. He steadied the roach and the sugar cube with his spare finger.

I like cockroaches because they're armoured, he said. Something glinted in his hand. He was holding a straight razor. —See this? he said. This is the thorax.

He lifted the straight razor to my sternum. —It's this part. From now on I am going to call my own chest a thorax.

The blade pressed against my skin as he laughed. —I guess it's not the same for women. His eyes caught on my chest as he lowered his attention back to the insect, who was exploring the sugar cube with its antennae. —Here they have holes for breathing, he said, swiping the air next to the roach with his blade, indicating the underside of its abdomen. —Isn't that neat?

The blade made a wet crunching sound when he sliced the insect in half. There were now two sides, each with its own antenna, which twitched as the final pulses exited the body.

Gross, said Patrick. He crumpled his nose. —I'll call this one Castor, he said, pointing his blade to one half of the insect. He flicked the blade to the other half. —This one's Pollux.

I didn't say anything. I went into the head to wash my hands.

The Islas Coronados were four islands fifteen miles south of San Diego. We anchored at the southern island, in a slender cove. In the twenties and thirties, smugglers had used the islands to run booze into California. There was even a casino. Aside from the wind-scraped foundations of the casino, which had closed when the Mexican government cracked down on gambling, you wouldn't find a trace of humans now, but several species of cactus, petrels, snakes, lizards, sea mammals, feral cats.

For dinner, Joan fried banana fritters and Spam. I tried not to think of the insect as I helped her cook. I tried not to see bristled legs in the bananas, which I also sliced lengthwise. Joan tapped the spotted pink mass from its tin. I tried not to look at it either. Every now and then, she opened the wrong cupboard or paused over the stove as though she had forgotten what she was doing. Her hands remained still, or folded in her green embroidered apron. I watched from my corner of the counter, where I now snapped the woody ends off asparagus. Eventually, I wiped my palms on my shorts and stepped toward her, rested my hand on her back.

Are you okay?

Yes.

She remembered what she searched for, salt, and sprinkled a pinch over the wedges of canned meat. Then she reached for the halved bananas, which I had fanned over the plate in a sunburst. She dunked each crescent in the batter and tossed it in the pan.

We ate in the cockpit. The sun's disc plunged nearer to us, sinking behind the island. As we'd approached this cove, the sunset narrowed the sea somehow, erecting a wall along the westward ocean that we followed between North Coronado, which looked like a pregnant mermaid floating on her back, and the middle islands. One of the middle islands was called Pilon de Azúcar, or "pile of sugar," which I liked.

We ate without a table, Joan opposite Kenneth, Patrick opposite me, paper plates balanced on our laps.

Would you look at that sky, said Kenneth.

The light was a sulphurous orange.

Joan shrugged, sipped her milk.

One of these days, said Patrick, we'll sit here admiring the sunset, as we're doing now, and it will turn out to be the reds nuking us from Moscow.

Oh come off it, said Kenneth.

I'm telling you, said Patrick. He nodded to his left. —If that's not the colour of nuclear armageddon, I don't know what is. Do you know how many civilians died from napalm in Tokyo? No one talks about that, he said.

Kenneth clunked his beer bottle down beside his foot. —Napalm's not a nuclear weapon. It's chemical.

What about Hiroshima and Nagasaki? I ventured, looking at Patrick.

People talk about them, he said.

Joan glanced at me with impatience. I didn't know what I'd done wrong and looked back at her.

It wasn't the most sheltered anchorage and every now and then a swell rose and rocked us. I fixed my gaze on my plate and sliced the food into smaller morsels. I think the others were feeling queasy too, because our conversation quieted into this rhythm of focused chewing as the water lifted us and let us drop. Then Joan broke the silence.

You're eating loudly.

She laid her bare foot on Kenneth's shoe.

He tightened his grip on his fork. He opened his mouth and brandished a tongue lumped with masticated Spam and asparagus. —What did you say, dear? I didn't hear you, he said, clashing his teeth together.

A trace of smile played on her lips, and I thought, so this is how their marriage works.

Across from me, Patrick sawed his Spam, inserted a morsel and chewed for a long time. I found myself imitating him—grinding the food more than normal to match his pace. Perhaps he noticed, I don't know, but his gaze lingered on me again. He still watched me with a fullness I hadn't encountered from other boys—as if he hoped to memorize the bone of my collar, the shape of my ears, the gap of fabric under my armpits. I felt compelling. Even the way I sipped my milk was important.

We played canasta until we couldn't see without lighting the lamps. Then Joan excused herself to bed. I followed. The galley sink offered more room to wash than the heads, so we brushed our teeth there side by side. We spat, rinsed our mouths, and as I reached for the towel to dry my chin, Joan gripped my wrists with both hands.

I'm glad you're here, she said. Thank you for coming.

I laughed, embarrassed. —Sure. I wanted to come.

She drew me into a hug, her arms locking rigidly around my shoulders so I had trouble breathing. —You're a good sister, she said.

I couldn't relax in her grip, so I remained poised that way, folded under her chin until she let me go.

Her expressiveness bothered me as I climbed into my berth. Did she know something I didn't? Had she heard from Mom? After the wedding, the remains of our mother-daughter relationship deteriorated. I used to marvel at her composure, the beauty I felt certain she possessed. I imitated it. That was the only way to love her—in imitation. But in school I met other women her age, teachers who embraced me with warmth. Not strategically like she did, but physically, emotionally, with all of themselves behind it. For them it was instinctive. When I realized that warmth, even love, could be instinctive, not a decision that shifted from one day to the next, based on mood or motivations, I didn't want to be like Mom anymore. Yet I feared that if Eugene or I left, she would perish. And Eugene could take off any week now. Frankly, I wouldn't have blamed him if he did.

Part of me wondered if Mom could live with them in San Diego. They had that house, after all. Then I could leave Victoria. For what, I didn't know, but all my dreams were predicated on going. To Vancouver, maybe. Or Europe. These thoughts lingered with me as I drifted off—the Sorbonne inviting me to study. My French wasn't great yet, but that didn't matter in my fantasy. I would meet a patient Frenchman who, as I sunk deeper into sleep, resembled Patrick. So I woke with a start when my door opened and I found someone at the foot of my bunk.

I gasped, scooted up the mattress into a sitting position. When I saw it was him, my breath calmed, but I continued to clutch the sheets around my chest.

I can't sleep in my berth, he said.

I continued to stare. He wore nothing but an undershirt and briefs.

So? I said—trying to sound harsh, though I felt myself softening toward him, as if he were my brother awake from a nightmare or wetting his bed.

Can I sleep with you?

I knew I should say no. But I didn't want to hurt his feelings.

There's no room.

We can make room.

I slanted my eyes at him—signalled with a frown that I would allow it but considered the request inappropriate.

He climbed onto the mattress. I pressed against the hull to leave as much space behind me as possible. He, in turn, crimped around my body. He left a polite gap between our hips, but folded his arm over my waist and lay his cheek on my pillow. His feet and knees slotted behind mine, the skin of his toes clammy, making me shiver.

Try anything and you're dead, I said.

His nose brushed against my neck as he nodded. For the second time that day, his breath tickled my ear.

He slipped out of the bunk at dawn and returned to his cabin. He had kept his word—he touched me as much as he needed not to fall off the bunk, no more. I decided not to bring it up. Events between him and me seemed to occur on another membrane, which pulsed, here and there, into the membrane we all occupied, but which contracted when a third person entered the room. I remembered our interactions as I remembered dreams, with doubt, and if I mentioned that night to him, I expected him to look at me questioningly. I didn't trust that my subconscious hadn't invented the whole thing.

In the galley, Joan crushed an orange with a palm-held juicer. Kenneth slumped on the settee, a day-old newspaper spread between his hands. The air smelled sweet, of maple and hickory from the bacon, which Joan slid onto a paper towel. She was toasting bread in the oven, in a wire rack over the gas flame. When the bread had darkened, she bent in time to remove the rack and set it on the stove. Her competence still marvelled me—when forced to cook in the past, she had improvised terrible concoctions, once adding pickled beets to spaghetti because she ran out of olives. Maybe her mother-in-law had stepped in, demonstrated a few recipes. Or she taught herself from magazines. The sea was tranquil compared to the day before, but Joan stood with a wide stance, as if braced for the yacht to lift and drop any moment. Still, her hands moved gracefully, like she had rehearsed where to step when the yacht dipped, the orange and the juicer in one palm while she flipped the bacon with her other hand.

Morning, she said.

Good morning.

I sat opposite Kenneth and tried to read the back of his newspaper. A headline about Kuwait's independence caught my eye, but he flattened the paper onto the table before I could read. Then Joan did something odd. She left the bacon on the towel and sat beside me.

Could you pass the editorials? she asked.

Kenneth leaned back. The top buttons of his shirt were undone. I couldn't see any chest hair. He slid the paper across the table. —It's a day old.

Oh really, said Joan. The *Union* doesn't deliver here?

He paused, arm still stretched from passing the paper across the table. A nerve in his lip beat. He retracted his arm and lowered his eyes to the section of paper he had kept for himself.

Is Patrick on deck? I asked, to remind them of my presence.

Yes, said Joan. She answered so quick I knew she hadn't read a word of the paper. She trained her eyes on the page nonetheless.

Won't the bacon get cold? said Kenneth.

Mm, she said. I'll have two pieces.

Kenneth sighed, exchanged a look with me, as if I must be used to her moods. It's true, she and Mom used to work themselves into athletic screaming matches. But her tone was different now.

I'll get the bacon, I offered, though I sat in the centre of the settee, boomerang in shape. One of them would have to stand to let me out.

Allow me, said Kenneth. He shifted off the bench, snatched the toast rack from the stove, the plate of bacon. I climbed after him to fetch the orange juice Joan had squeezed, which she had placed on the galley stove for balance.

Have you already had coffee? I asked.

Yes, said Joan.

I twisted the top chamber from the moka pot and dumped the grounds in the bag we had strung on the cupboard door for garbage.

You're in a queer state this morning, said Kenneth as he wedged back behind the table. —Did you sleep poorly?

She reached across the table for a strip of bacon and punctured it with her teeth.

Because if you're sleeping poorly, said Kenneth, you may as well take my watch tonight.

I slept fine.

If you say so.

Patrick, do you want coffee? I called toward the companionway.

Joan, said Kenneth. You're indecent.

Her bathrobe had parted. A breast slouched between two thin panels of fabric. I looked away, scooped coffee from the tin into the metal filter. A spoonful of grounds trembled onto the floor and I knelt to wipe them with a dishcloth. When I rose, she still had not secured her robe. A crumb of bacon had fallen to her nipple. She pressed it with a finger and sucked the morsel back in her mouth. Kenneth's stare hung off her breast. Serenely, she fastened her robe and stood from the table. She reached in her pocket for her cigarettes and climbed the steps to the cockpit.

The air was so sluggish we decided to stay anchored for the morning until the wind picked up. Then on to Ensenada. Kenneth kept saying "It's no race," which made me think he really did want to go faster but felt constricted by his crew, which was essentially Patrick. And though he'd used the motor a few times, he wanted to avoid long distances because of the sound and the smell, and "if I'd wanted to motor, I'd have bought a motor boat." So we would enjoy the islands for now. After Ensenada, there would be nowhere to anchor until San Quintín, which wasn't much of an anchorage at all, he said—just a morsel of land you duck behind to stay out of the wind. It was unlikely we would make it to Cedros Island, which we had talked about, but Kenneth wanted to avoid crossing Sebastián Vizcaíno Bay anyway. The Pacific rollers could be huge this time of year.

After breakfast, I tucked an avocado into my shirt pocket and followed Joan into the cockpit. Everyone had treated her marriage as a triumph. Our schoolteachers, the neighbours, even our mother bathed Joan in approval. Their congratulations on my As thinned at the same time, as if school achievement was a childish distraction of mine, with no bearing on the real world. Perhaps they were right, but I didn't know how else to be. Every now and then a clot of destructiveness inspired me to smoke

cigarettes with friends and kiss boys I did not like instead of preparing for exams—but ultimately I woke in the night, rattled with nerves, and read my notes so furiously, I completed my exams with vigorous if shaky handwriting, and the teachers complimented my “fervour.” But I envied Joan this bath of approval. As if she had done her bit now. She had married; she was no longer a burden to Mom or Eugene.

Patrick sat on the foredeck with a book in his hand. I made sure not to look at him as I climbed from the companionway. The fog was still lifting, and the air remained cool, but Joan had not added a layer beneath her robe. She had tightened the sash around her waist and hiked up her socks, which must have belonged to Kenneth—mustard yellow, pouching at the heel.

I brought you an avocado, I said, sitting beside her on the bench.

She glanced from her magazine. —You didn’t have to.

I halved the avocado with a butter knife. —What are you reading?

Horoscope.

Can I see?

I passed her half the fruit and a spoon. She traded me the magazine.

Read mine, she said.

I flattened the centrefold on my lap and scanned the page for Taurus. —A better week to meditate than to act. A certain amount of hindrance is around, and you should make plans carefully. Saturday is your brightest day. Especially for moving about.

Her eyes shifted to the water, which barely lapped against the hull. —Ironic enough, she said. What’s yours?

I carved a petal of avocado with the butter knife and smeared it to the roof of my mouth. —A tendency towards family misunderstandings and upsets could mar this week. Avoid arguments and extravagance. Try not to offend.

She laughed. —Good thing you’re the least offensive person I know.

I had balanced another rift of avocado on my knife, but the hard edge of her voice made me lower it, scrape the flesh back into the husk.

What do you mean?

Nothing.

I lay the knife on the magazine, not caring that it left an oily smudge.

What? she said.

Nothing.

You're annoyed.

No I'm not.

The fog had lifted enough now that my bench pointed into the sun. I tossed the magazine to one side and pushed the sunglasses from my hair to the bridge of my nose.

You're unfair to Kenneth, I said.

Her eyes scanned my sunglasses a moment, then lowered to the avocado, which she hadn't touched. I watched with guilty satisfaction as her fingers tightened around the spoon. She scored the green flesh and lifted a portion to her mouth.

That's none of your business, she said.

I'm just observing. You know, as a third party. He's very patient with you.

Patrick could hear every word if he wanted to. But he appeared distracted and I didn't care anyway.

You're sarcastic to him, I continued, Mom's voice filling my head. —Belittling, I said.

At least someone around here says what she thinks.

What's that supposed to mean?

She tilted her cheek toward her shoulder. The sun glinted off her earring. —You only say what pleases people.

That's not true.

She nestled back against the cockpit coaming, as if to get a better look at me. Then she said her cruellest thing. —You're turning into her, you know. You don't see the glass as half-empty or half-full. You see a glass, and you fill it with whatever's in front of you.

In that comment, she confirmed all my fears: I was an empty glass. A mirror. My existence depended on who looked back.

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That afternoon, Patrick and Kenneth optimistically weighed anchor. We made some progress south, but the breeze died again after a few hours, and Kenneth decided to lower the sails until the wind picked up.

Patrick dozed on the aft deck, the soles of his feet together, knees splayed apart. I thought he might adjust his position when I sat next to him, but no. I opened my copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Patrick saluted two fingers at me and shut his eyes.

In front of us, Kenneth hunched at the helm. He teetered on one leg, his right foot hoisted onto the wheel so he could clip his toenails. On the other side of the yacht, Joan smoked cigarettes and ashed them into the crease of her magazine. It's miserable to fight with someone on a boat—you can't get away from them. Below deck, the heat was intolerable, and you knew they were above you anyway, you could hear their footsteps. They were always, always within earshot.

Patrick's chest barely expanded as he breathed. That's how I knew he wasn't sleeping. His eyeballs hummed beneath his lids. He would be able to smell the lavender oil I had stolen from my sister's suitcase and wiped along the bones of my collar. It helped her sleep.

I couldn't focus on Hemingway. The fictional sea layered over the real sea made me feel queasy. The view of land had receded over the last few hours, though we continued to follow the scabrous outline of its shore.

What are you reading? Patrick said then.

I rotated the book so he could see the jacket. He didn't open his eyes. He slanted in the chair, heels shined out, one side of his unbuttoned shirt wedged under his armpit. His face had retained the feminine angles from childhood—the lift of his cheekbones, blond eyebrows tidier than my own, floral lips.

What's it about?

If he opened his eyes, he would see a sinuous man slumped in a skiff on a yellow sea.

A fisherman, I said.

He rocked his skull along the wood slats to find a comfortable gap to rest in.

Will you read it to me? he asked.

The book?

Sure.

Why?

His tongue darted over his lips. The sun had parched them. I thought he might need a glass of water.

Should I start from the beginning? I asked.

No. Read where you are now.

So I opened the book to the page marked by my finger and licked my own lips. The passage described the fisherman's dreams, which no longer featured storms or women or fish, but lions on the sand.

What do you dream of? Patrick asked, interrupting me.

I dreamed a lot, but right then I couldn't recall anything recent. —I don't know, I said. Maybe I'd have dreamed last night if you didn't disturb me.

Didn't you sleep? He opened his eyes for the first time. His irises blued deeper as his pupils shrunk.

What do you dream of? I asked him.

I don't.

Come off it. Everyone dreams.

I don't, he repeated.

We sat in silence. I returned to the book. The old man was peeing now. He peed against his shack.

Patrick's moods confused me. I wondered if we would talk again, or if this was it.

What books do you read? I tried.

What people tell me.

You mean recommendations?

No.

It disappointed me to see his desire contract. I assumed that's what this meant. Like any tension, his desire had stretched, released, zinged back the opposite way.

I read what teachers assign me, he said, after a long pause in which I had forgotten my question.

How imaginative, I said, though I read what people told me too. Every book I'd packed had been on a course list.

He smiled—recognizing this fact, or else amused by the cruel slant to my voice, which I had never taken with him before. I pushed it further.

Do you think what they tell you, too?

Only the pretty ones.

That response irritated me most of all. I released a noise of exasperation and opened the book again, searching the words I kept abandoning mid-sentence.

A friend of mine at Cornell is from Ankara, he said. He tells me what to read. He's a poet.

I trained my eyes on the text, as if Patrick's anecdote uninterested me.

He's pretty?

He has excellent taste. He wanted to impress a girl, someone we both know, who writes plays. I helped him find the words to translate the poem of a Turkish writer he admires. A communist.

He dragged out the word “communist.” I had a feeling he made that up.

You want to hear?

I guess.

It’s a love poem.

He rolled on the deck to face me, his body bracketed into a fetal position, his cheek propped by his hand.

Loving you is like eating bread dipped in salt, / like waking feverish at night / and putting my mouth to the water faucet.

It continued from there. When he finished reciting, I looked down. I studied a bruise that had formed above my kneecap the shape of a limpet shell. My pulse wobbled in my throat. He had not blushed when he said “loving you.” Who was loving, I wondered. Who was “you”?

That evening the ocean was a texture like mercury, which I half expected to fragment on the sides of the yacht. As if to emphasize our stagnation, Joan and I still hadn't spoken to each other. Partly as a peace offering, partly because Joan hadn't moved to, I started the meatloaf.

Our stillness amplified the volume of every movement on deck, as well as their bickering. On the first day, voices were licked into the wind and the creak of the masts. Now I could hear every word she and Kenneth said. I considered shutting the companionway hatch—paused for a moment, knife hovered over the onion. But her feet appeared on the steps. She leapt the rest of the distance, thudding onto the sole, and charged past me to her cabin. A moment later, Kenneth followed, looking wearily calm.

Fumes from the onion bit into my eyes. I set the knife down, leaned against the counter, waited for the blindness to pass.

I only asked if you were changing for dinner, said Kenneth. His voice sounded strained, as if he had repeated his point more than once.

You said I looked coarse.

I didn't mean it like that.

How else do you mean that?

Their voices silenced for a moment. Then Joan said, Do you have a request?

Don't be severe.

What sounded like my sister's foot slammed into the built-in closet. Hooks of metal hangers scraped across the rail.

Choose, she said. Do you like this one?

Joan.

No? Too much skin? How about this? You've said it features my breasts nicely.

I tried to shut them out. I lifted the knife again to slice onion. Their argument reminded me oddly of a photograph we had seen years ago in our mother's *Cosmopolitan*. An American girl marches down a sidewalk in Florence. Behind her, a man grinds into his scooter, one foot on the sidewalk, mouth open in laughter; another leans in his chair, elbow folded over the seatback; another bends and coos to her, hand pressed to his trousers; another watches her from the shadow of a pillar; another stands flat-footed, pelvis thrust out, jacket over his shoulders, mouth stilled mid-speech; fifteen men in total, eyes lurching after her. Even as girls we recognized that scene, though we'd never been to Italy.

A sound of thrashing emerged from their cabin. —How's this?

I couldn't bear it any longer. I wiped my hands on my apron and left the counter. But Kenneth had not shut the door, or the door had rebounded when he slammed it. I saw my sister on all fours, a chiffon negligee wedged over her shoulders, her back arched, buttocks combing the air. For a moment, I feared he might charge the berth and ram her against the hull. But he did not. He stepped past me over the pile of clothes.

Joan's eyes landed on me in the doorway. Her chest expanded and contracted. I guided her to sit. She pulled her knees to her chest, then let them spill open cross-legged.

You okay? I said, slotting a blue housedress back into the cupboard.

She stared at the wall. Her arms stretched to drape each knee. I could see her underwear, which I recognized from home—a cotton set Mom had bought in a six-pack. At the sight of her underwear, which I also owned, the last shreds of anger from that afternoon softened.

Why don't we dress for dinner, I said. I've started the meatloaf. Which pants were you wearing?

I lifted her white capris from the floor and snapped them in the air to flatten the creases.

Underneath, a silk blouse lay crumpled. —That's a nice top. Where'd you find it?

Her eyes focused and unfocused at the wall, as if she were trying not to blink.

It's very European. Is it from Paris?

She sat like an Eastern monk, the solemnity of her posture undermined by the sunny chiffon nightie that barely covered the crease of her thighs.

Do you think I'm indecent? she said.

Of course not. The roots of her hair were damp with sweat. I guided her forehead toward my stomach. —You're the most decent person I know, I said.

He thinks I am.

Shh.

I pinched the blouse off the floor without removing my hand from her ear, as if separation would return her panic. I made a show of admiring the blouse in my hand.

Why don't you put this on, Joanie?

Who wants kids with an indecent woman anyhow. The children would be indecent. It runs in the family.

Put this on. You're working yourself up again.

Sheila's children will be *highly* decent.

That's enough, Joan. Take off the nightie. Good. That's it. Now put this on.

Later, I couldn't stop thinking about the woman in Florence. I was ten years old, Joan thirteen when we found the photograph. She ripped the page from the magazine and pasted it in her diary, which I wasn't allowed to read. I told Mom. Mom smacked her cheek without taking off her rings. Joan had to buy a second copy from her own money. After two weeks, I took the new magazine into my room and cut the photograph with scissors and pasted it into my own journal.

We had both been that woman. It involved Kenneth and Patrick. It involved my swim costume. The beach. The service station in James Bay, where girls from Joan's high school had asked men to buy them cigarettes. I used to follow her there. The men had wives at home, perhaps daughters, but they watched us as they filled their tanks, their eyes following our movement across the parking lot. They

checked our bodies for newness—hips that softened over summer, breasts packed into last year’s bras. In return, the girls received entire packs of cigarettes still in their cellophane. I was younger than the others, but the men liked my legs. Their eyes darted from my ankles to my knees, as if measuring the length of them, how slowly they could peel the socks from my calves. I had recognized in their stare both shame and want. It had thrilled me.

By dinner, the tensions of that day, as the other tensions I noticed, began to contract. Joan gazed into the middle distance, with long intervals between each blink. Kenneth chatted with Patrick about plans—whether to turn around once the wind picked up or sail through the night to Ensenada.

The meatloaf tasted bland to me. For Mom, Eugene and Luke, I prepared meals you couldn’t bungle, like chicken thighs baked in cream of mushroom soup. Kenneth seemed to like it. He ate with his mouth open so you could see the brown meat on his tongue. By contrast, Patrick carved his slice into minute fragments. The more I watched him, his shirt buttoned, though misaligned, one half of his collar higher than the other, the more certain I felt he hadn’t aged. I knew so little about him—how he found university, who his friends were, if he had a girl in Ithaca—and he knew nothing of my life. Yet I recognized something. A trace of myself, which I had marked all those summers ago, as he had marked me.

A drop of salad oil fell on my breastbone. Both Patrick and I looked to it. I wiped it with my finger. We ate in silence. Or they ate. I practised a theatre of eating—pushing the meat this way with my fork. Slicing it. Dabbing it to my tongue.

Around us, the sun imprinted its belly into the sea, coating the waves with purple light. No one mentioned the dolphins anymore. I was taken by how serenely the creatures swam—they had internalized the rhythm of the surf, their dorsal fins cresting the moment the waves peaked, then sliding back under. I adjusted my breath to match them. I inhaled as the dolphins lifted over the waves and exhaled as they

dipped, inhaled as they lifted, exhaled as they dipped. I closed my eyes and continued to sense our movement: my breath, the yacht, the dolphins linked by one body.

The wind picked up after dinner. We decided to sail through the night to Ensenada, Patrick and Kenneth alternating three-hour shifts at the helm. The restored motion of the yacht assisted the air of détente on the boat, literally a de-tension, and I slept deeply. My dream recalled an incident I had not thought of in years —when I had stolen a jar of cream from Roy’s dairy wagon. In the dream, I saw only the jar tucked in my blouse, cream rinsing the sides of the glass, tuned to the rhythm of my torso as I pedalled. Just that. The sway of cream in a jar. I woke from the timber creaking and made a half-conscious note to tell Patrick next time he asked. So it wasn’t as startling, this time, when the door opened.

He stood once more in white underwear. Perhaps it was the moonlight, but he looked malnourished. Ridges of bone bulged from his forearms. An arrow indented the gap between his pectorals, his ribs whiskering under his armpits. His thighs were all sinew: bone, tendon, vein twisted into rope.

Go to bed, Patrick.

I was on watch. It’s Kenneth’s turn now but I can’t sleep.

So you wake me up?

He smiled in his impish way and shut the door behind him. —I won’t stay long. You’re awake now anyway.

You can be a real pill, you know that?

He climbed onto the bunk, sat with his legs folded to one side. His eyes dropped to the strap of my nightgown. I tugged the wool blanket tighter around my chest.

I’d like to kiss you, he said. It would help me sleep.

Cut it out, Patrick.

Just once. Then I’ll leave.

I wondered how much Kenneth could hear from the cockpit.

One kiss, he said with a gentle smile. Then I'll go back.

He raised his eyebrows in a playful way, like Luke did when he asked for ice cream money.

Just one? I said.

He nodded.

Then you'll go?

That's right.

I lifted my mouth, eyes focused on the wall above him.

Not there.

I didn't know what he meant. He seemed pleased at my confusion. Excited by it. He parted the blanket from my lap.

Every muscle tensed as he bowed forward. I didn't move. I wanted to tell him to stop, yet I didn't comprehend what was happening. Then I realized I couldn't shift my jaw. I tried to start there—a twitch to release my tongue, so I could ask him to cut it out. But the bones of my mouth had ossified. I could no longer see his face. His nose touched the cotton between my legs. He breathed deeply. I felt a rush of air where he exhaled. He kissed the crotch of my underwear. After a moment, he sat up and flattened my nightie over my knees.

See? he said. Just one. Now you kiss me.

That wasn't the deal, but my jaw remained locked. He guided my head forward so it hovered above his groin. He moaned, anticipating my touch, and opened his thighs. The scent of him drifted from his underwear, which was blotted with moisture. I kissed him once.

When I sat up, he was grinding his teeth, his fist clenched into the mattress.

We're almost done, he said.

What did he mean, almost. I hardly noticed his hand close over mine. He guided me out the door toward his cabin. I didn't protest. His bunk appeared untouched, the top sheet folded over the wool blanket. He opened his toiletry case and removed a bottle of antiseptic.

Wipe yourself off, he said.

Again, I didn't understand.

He lifted a pair of shorts discarded on the floor and removed his white handkerchief. He passed me the handkerchief along with the bottle. When I understood what he wanted me to do, and that he wasn't going to turn away, I lifted the hem of my nightgown. I folded it high enough on my thigh so I could push down my underwear. I spilled antiseptic onto the cotton, the cold liquid dripping between my fingers. I clenched my teeth to avoid crying and dabbed my vagina. The liquid stung and smelled of permanent marker. He watched a moment longer, then nodded. I screwed the cap on the bottle and yanked the underwear halfway up my thighs before he stopped me. He guided me to sit down on the bed. He knelt on the wood sole and peeled my underwear to my ankles. I could see his nail brush on the bedside table, along with a pair of clippers. He nuzzled my groin. I focused on the nail brush. The antiseptic irritated the flesh of my vagina. His tongue chafed. After two minutes, maybe three, he pulled away and removed two clothespins from the toiletry case. Clumsily, as if undressing a doll, he yanked the nightgown over my shoulders. I sat naked on his bed. He opened a clothespin and clamped it around the base of my nipple. The jaws of the peg were high enough on my breast that the pain wasn't sharp—more of an ache. He burrowed back inside my skirt and licked me. The flesh under the pin started to bruise.

Can I go now?

Relief gushed at the sound of my own voice. Something in my tone must have alarmed him, for he sat back on his heels and wiped his mouth.

You're not enjoying this?

No.

I'm sorry to hear that.

I removed the clothespins and tugged the nightgown back over my head. He didn't stop me. The cotton chafed my nipples. I walked back to my cabin and closed the door. There was no lock. In bed, I shut my eyes and felt the throb of my vagina. It seemed to me the pain matched the rhythm of the sea.

I lay in bed the next day until everyone left the galley. Then I made toast, coffee, and carried it back to my cabin. I reinserted myself in the sheets, slid my hand under my knees, my ankles, to tuck the blanket in the gaps. I had not realized I'd been crying. In the mirror on the cupboard door, a grey eel blinked back at me. Yet my emotion felt disconnected from sadness or anger. More of a reeling. The way you lurch when the yacht pitches over a Pacific roller. Again and again. A reeling.

Mom had taught me how to drain puffy eyelids. You close your eyes and tap your finger on the swollen flaps of skin. The word "tap." Like plugging two faucets into your eyes and twisting the handles.

Around noon, Joan checked on me. I jumped at her knock.

Willa?

My toast remained on the nightstand without a plate. I had placed it on *Metamorphoses*. The bread had grown cold, the butter congealed in a tract down the middle. I took the book onto my lap.

Are you okay? What happened?

I worried, for a moment, that I had lost my speech again. But in the mirror, I saw myself shrug and say, Nothing.

You've been crying.

Allergies.

Out here?

The girl in the mirror shrugged again.

Joan's stare lingered on me. Then she turned to the metal sink, straightened the hand towel.

We've anchored at Todos Santos. I thought we could go for a dip while Kenneth sleeps for a few hours.

Okay.

There's another boat here too—they said we could borrow their snorkels. You want to come?

Okay.

You're sure you're all right?

I'll get my swimsuit on.

It felt like a girdle that morning, the stiff cotton around my stomach, digging seams into my upper thighs. I hadn't eaten much, yet I felt bloated, ashamed of the flesh the suit pushed from my waist. A blue stamp marked my breast where the flesh felt tender. Another woman would have slapped him.

Greta was bobbing near a twenty-foot sailboat called *Mozart*. The family included three children, the parents and a grandmother. Our schooner looked ancient next to their fibreglass vessel, three times its size. Kenneth's voice drifted to me over the deck, where I rubbed suntan lotion on my shoulders. He was shouting to two sandy-haired boys from the gunwale. —You don't believe we're pirates? Then I guess you're not interested in joining our crew.

They had lent us their snorkels and masks. From the corner of my eye I watched Patrick float on his back. The mask encircled his face, the tube bracketing his cheek, like he didn't realize he had to face the other way.

I dove in before he saw me, muscled a path in the opposite direction until I could hold my breath no longer. Then I surfaced, wiped the salt from my eyes, treaded water in a circle to note our distance. He floated face down near the other end of the schooner. On one side of us, the south island rose—much grander than the Coronados, though scraggy, with tufted grass and cactus and guano-pasted rocks. In the other direction, a blue haze. We were too far to see Ensenada.

A girl stood on the deck of the family's boat. She wore red thongs, her hair pinched into a braid. She leapt into the water chest first and beads of water surged from her heels. From where I floated, the colours shifted and lost their shape. The seat of her swimsuit looked like an armful of yellow daffodils. Slowly, she rose by the crown of her head. Her braid lifted from her shoulders and pricked the surface.

She could hold her breath a long time. I counted the seconds. Forty. Forty-five. Finally, she gasped to the air. A ribbon of hair slicked her cheek. She stared at me as she caught her breath. It seemed I was watching myself. Her suit sagged from her tailbone as she scaled the swim ladder and clambered onto the deck. Then she raised her arms over her head and dove back in. I dipped under water and opened my eyes. The girl's body formed a pale crescent, her chest punched out, legs arced behind her. Though it appeared dark from deck, the water was so clear it hung between us the colour of oxidized copper. The skin of her face looked green.

Now I counted forty-five seconds. Fifty. She rose first and I followed. A woman on the deck of the sailboat called her name. Lydia.

I have to go, mouthed the girl, though we had not spoken to each other. She turned and swam to the woman, who crouched at the ladder in a pink swim costume and matching lipstick. She held a towel.

At the stern of the sailboat, the grandmother washed herself with a pitcher of water. She had rolled the suit down to her hips. Her stomach pillowed over the lining, her breasts hanging from her chest like milky turnips.

I paddled around the stern of their boat, far from the schooner. What would happen if they couldn't find me? If I sunk under water at the right moments, held my breath for fifty seconds, sixty? I would probably make it to sixty. How long could I float out here? With the dolphins and albacore tuna. It occurred to me I didn't know what tuna looked like. I only imagined the fish in cans.

If I floated on my back, would the tide carry me to shore? In books, islands are fertile paradises with coconuts clacking off trees and fish you can spear from the shore. But who says it's not a sandy pip in the sea with a few gourds of wild cucumber?

Joan called from the deck of the schooner.

Another option was: climb onto the family's sailboat and stow away in the head. How long would Joan ask Kenneth to wait for me? The girl would teach me how to French-braid my hair. Joan didn't know how to French-braid either. That's why she kept it short.

I closed my eyes and experienced the salt on my skin, wizening my cheeks where it dried in the sun, the ocean under my heels, bearing my weight. I thought about ablution, the touching of clean water, the oils of last night curling into the sea.

When Joan called a second time, I swam back. She had dried off already and changed into an oyster-grey pantsuit, her hair parted and locked in foam curlers.

I heaved myself onto deck from the ladder, sensing the weight of my body. Patrick watched from the cockpit as I swept my hair to one side without wringing it. The sea water made me feel heavier, my bathing suit sodden, the water pooling around my feet. For a moment, I felt truly that I belonged in the sea. I was an octopus—a waterlogged sac on land, but nimble in the ocean, my limbs flowering and contracting to propel me through water, as petals open and close on a poppy.

Joan passed me a towel. When I didn't take it from her, she rubbed the terrycloth on my shoulders herself, careful not to dampen her pantsuit.

What's the occasion? I asked her, not looking at him. His eyes combed my thighs, red and puckered from cold, the indents over my bum where the suit had pressed its edges and now twisted into the crack.

Well I thought we were going to Ensenada, but Kenneth doesn't want to clear customs until we use this treat he brought from the clinic. So we'll have dinner here instead. He's sleeping now.

I couldn't imagine what "treat" would come from a clinic and cause trouble at customs, unless he had packed gross quantities of painkillers.

And then what? I said.

We'll overnight here and see Ensenada tomorrow.

That wasn't good news. I missed the sensation of forward motion. The terrycloth was irritating my skin, and this physical discomfort was amplified by Patrick's stare, which dared me to look back at him. I tore the towel from my sister's hands, wound it around my chest and skulked below deck.

I climbed into my dirty houseboy pants without drying my legs and buttoned a flannel shirt over my chest. I looked shapeless, a beached cephalopod, the flannel billowing over my hips. I wiped the hair from my face, twisted the strands into a bun.

Then I was in Patrick's cabin, sifting through the sweaty undershirts he had dumped on the floor. His toiletry case hung on the cupboard door. I unhooked the bag and sat on his bunk. Inside, he kept his razor and pot of cream, two horsehair brushes. Here also was a metal comb, toothbrush, tube of paste. Two spaces in the toiletry kit were vacant: one for nail clippers, the other for the nail brush, which remained on the nightstand.

In monster stories, the hero steals something from the demon for her protection: a nail clipping, an eyelash. I read about one demon in the Philippines. His knees arc above his head when he sits, he lives atop balete trees, in bamboo and banana groves. To subdue him, you leap onto the creature's back with a rope and pluck three spines from his mane.

I couldn't find clothespins, but I stole the nail brush and hid it under the mattress of my berth.

*

It had been Patrick's idea to borrow nitrous oxide from Kenneth's dental office. The canister mounted over us on the galley counter. It looked like a missile. Kenneth watched it from the settee, as if his gaze could prevent the can from tipping over the counter. He scrambled from his seat and lifted the can, set it on the settee. When he saw I wanted to sit down, he lifted the cylinder again and placed it on the floor, his palm dropping a sweat print onto the blue metal.

It was Patrick's idea, he said for the second time. —I could get fired.

Joan stroked his hairline and hovered her mouth behind his earlobe.

You're just nervous, she whispered, then stepped back behind the galley counter. —They'll never notice.

Water lapped against the hull, but without movement for so long that I felt more and more claustrophobic. Patrick leaned against the cushion on the other side of the settee. His stare pricked me with every sweep of his eyes, from my oversized flannel shirt to the bun I had pinned at the crown of my head. He lit a cigarette.

Joan took in my outfit also, but she didn't say anything. She dumped hamburger meat into a glass bowl and massaged the mass with parsley.

Did you catch a chill from the swim? she asked. You look pale.

Headache.

Kenneth, why don't you fetch her some Tylenol.

It's okay. It'll pass.

Kenneth.

He turned from the can, slid his hands into his pockets and headed toward their cabin. —Where did you say it was?

My purse. Hanging on the door.

She wiped her cheek on her shoulder, both hands plugged in the bowl of raw meat.

Will, can you grind pepper for me?

I joined her at the bowl, ground pepper into the scarlet mass, which again I couldn't look at closely. I focused on the cheap candlestick someone had planted in the centre of the table—a rococo mermaid heaving the wax stub on her back, engraved grapes spilling lavishly down the nickel column.

You like it? said Patrick. I took it from my mother's.

His lips whitened around his cigarette. He released a long chain of smoke through his smile.

Excuse me, I said. I set down the grinder and climbed the steps to the deck. Behind me, Kenneth shouldered into the galley from their cabin. He said something with a rigid voice. A silence followed. I walked faster to the bow.

When I reached the side, I leaned over the gunwale. A school of fish hung suspended in the water, the light glinting off their bodies before the fleet lifted and tilted into the tide. I could hear Joan and Kenneth fighting in the galley. I tried to block out the sound, inhaled the ocean's salt on my skin, the tang of seagull shit dried onto the deck. Slowly, larger shadows overtook the shadows of the helm. Then these darkneses—spilled by the masts, the boom—were overtaken by the largest shadow, of Earth turning away from the sun. I closed my eyes. The wind fingered the curl that had dropped from my braid, dangling down the nape of my neck.

When I returned below deck, something had happened. All three of them sat on the settee with plates and hamburgers, though no one had called me to dinner. Nor had they started eating, but when I perched beside Joan on the end of the settee, Kenneth lifted his hamburger in both hands, as if he had been waiting. There wasn't enough room for me on the bench, but no one shimmied over. I clenched my butt muscles to avoid slipping. Patrick watched me take my place, then lifted his hamburger too. My sister clasped her hands in her lap, the whites of her eyes yellowed from crying. Kenneth fidgeted with his fork, spinning the utensil tines-down on the table. Without taking a bite, Patrick set his burger back down and began to saw it in half with his knife. Joan jerked one hand free from her lap. She shook the bottle of ketchup upside down and set it next to my plate.

The first bite of my hamburger drew only a mouthful of bun, which dried my tongue and made it difficult to swallow. I reached for my glass of milk. That's when I noticed the bottle of Enovid on the galley counter. I glanced at Joan. She felt my eyes, I knew, and didn't look back.

We ate—my sister's hands trembling under the table, her vibrations absorbed by my thighs wedged against hers; Kenneth, who hadn't spoken since he found the contraceptives in her purse; Patrick, who cut his hamburger in sixths before eating and kept laying down his utensils to palm his hair.

When Kenneth stood to wrest himself from the settee, he muttered something I couldn't hear except the word "solipsistic." He said it meanly, but I'd always thought there was something of the sun in

the word—*sol*, like the Spanish. *Solar*. In dictionaries, the word comes from *solus*, alone, but maybe they are not so different, the sun and solitude. Maybe they need each other.

When Kenneth had disappeared above deck, I helped Joan clear the dishes.

Are you okay? I leaned to her over my stack of plates.

She looked at Patrick first, who studied us from the table, then me, before taking the plates from my hands and setting them in the sink.

I don't know.

I passed her the dish detergent, meeting Patrick's eye for the first time all evening. *Scram*, I mouthed. I turned to Joan. —Talk to him. I'll do these.

She pressed her hands to the bottom of the sink. The suds marked her forearms as the basin filled with water.

Patrick went up on deck. Joan dipped the plates in the water without rinsing them. I didn't say anything. I wiped the crumbs and rifts of foam with a towel.

If he doesn't like it, he can find a new wife, see what I care, she said.

You should talk to him.

What do you know? You're so good at relationships?

Eventually, the yacht pushed into motion. From the window, I noticed we were retracing our path from the cove, around the easternmost point of the island. We were headed back north. Not anchoring overnight or stopping in Ensenada. Kenneth had turned us around.

*

Patrick administered the gas in red balloons that he pinched shut with his fingers and passed over the settee table like soap bubbles. My sister closed her mouth around the rubber and breathed in and out, the balloon expanding and contracting. Eventually, she bowed away, her eyelids fluttering for forty seconds,

maybe sixty. When he passed me my balloon, I pinched it tight in my lap. I felt wounded. Joan would rather humour Patrick than tell me what had happened. But I couldn't stand being left behind. So I took the balloon in my mouth and inhaled the gas, which wicked the back of my throat. Then warmth filled my limbs and their voices bent in my ears, and for a moment I wondered if we always saw our breath in balloons, would we realize how precious it was. In what felt like hours later, though no more than a minute could have passed, I woke with a cobweb of saliva latched to my chin.

Next, Patrick presented a mask attached to a breathing tube, which he screwed onto the canister. Joan lay back on the settee and shut her eyes. He fixed the plastic to her nose. A loose smile played on her lips as the gas streamed up her nostrils for one minute, two. Longer than I could hold my breath.

We took turn as his patients. We lay on the wood sole and he strapped the plastic mask over our noses. The sun filled our heads; his words slow like he sucked a crust of bread. The tension released from my body. I didn't even mind when he touched my breast. After a few minutes, he removed the mask and carried it to Joan, fixed it over her nose, the strap indenting the flesh of her cheek, stretching the baby hairs above her ear. Her eyelids closed, and I saw an openness I had never found before—her forehead long, unbroken by the pots of her eyes, extending past her pale eyebrows and the bridge of her nose. Patrick adjusted the nozzle of his can and we both watched her nod, the smile parting her mouth. As he stepped toward her, his shoe tipped over his canvas satchel, which sat beside the canister on the floor. The contents spilled onto the floor. I made them out from the settee: a pouch of clothespins, a length of frayed rope, from the locker in the bow, I guessed, safety pins, the bottle of disinfectant. He inserted a finger under Joan's collar and traced the drop of her neckline. Then his hand settled on the crotch of her pantsuit. After another minute, he removed the mask and strapped it over his own nose. I waited for his head to tip back, then reached for his satchel. I tied the rope around his bare ankles; he wasn't wearing socks. I tied a constrictor knot, which Dad had taught me. His hands flapped to remove the mask from his mouth, and I pushed it back. I unbuttoned my flannel shirt and parted it over my chest so he would think it was a game. I removed his shoelaces. Every time he nudged the mask away and nodded awake, I flashed him.

Sometimes I massaged my breasts and pressed them together to make cleavage. A bulge built in his trousers. I pushed him onto his side so I could get at his arms. I bound his wrists with the shoelaces. Joan touched her fingers to her temples. She watched my actions with confusion in her eyes, as if she might be dreaming. After I yanked the knot tight, Patrick flopped onto his spine. I readjusted the mask on his face; the gas funnelled into his nostrils. I wondered how long you were meant to go under for.

Joan ran her eyes along Patrick's body, which had contorted on the floor like someone pushed from a window.

You should find Kenneth, I said.

What are you doing?

I tried to recall the thoughts that led us here, but my memories had unhinged, billowing in my head like bright, teasing clown fish. I saw the rope in his satchel, the clothespins on my breast. Strands of jellyfish branding my wrist, the rowboat. Joan in a blouse too large for her bust, pushing Kenneth against the well at the beach house. My mother's foot in a nude stocking. Ko-Ko's origami frogs. The phosphorescence. Three bears at the zoo on hind legs, their paws shining out.

I know what I'm doing, I said, though I didn't. A giggle rose like bile in my throat, but I kept it down.

Even at twenty-three, she could slash her eyes like a nun, her thumbs worrying the pockets of her pantsuit, the heel of her pump drilling the floor.

Go find your husband, I said. While you still have one. We both know you will anyway, so stop wasting your time.

She scooped the curls off her shoulder, scraped her fingers along her scalp.

Fine. You're on your own.

She dropped her hair and gripped the step rail. She climbed to the hatch. I really felt it, then: alone.

Patrick remained a crimped husk on the floor. A flash of sweat cooled over my forehead—what if I'd given him a brain injury? Had he been inhaling for too long?

My hands clattered to remove the mask from his nose. I bracketed my wrists under his armpits and dragged him toward his cabin, before Joan or Kenneth returned below deck. His chin knocked my knees. Then his head lifted, his eyes opened and he released a panicked shout. I lost my grip and his shoulders slammed to the floor. He writhed for a moment before he realized his forearms were bound. This discovery stunned him. He lay dumbly for a moment and I lifted him again, slinging him into his cabin. He tried to curse at me, but his jaw had slacked from the gas. His voice came out mangled, like an orangutan's. Still, I removed the handkerchief from his trouser pocket and jammed it in his mouth. He continued to grunt with only his throat muscles.

I couldn't heave him onto the bunk by myself, so I tucked a pillow under his head and draped the wool blanket over his body. I closed his door and returned to my cabin.

I decided to check on him. Joan had been outside for over an hour—if they'd heard us from deck, they ignored it. Patrick had stopped groaning, but I couldn't sleep. They could return below deck and find him. Or he could appear in my cabin with the straight razor. I pulled a flannel shirt over my shoulders and climbed from my bed. The yacht was pitched slightly to the side, and I had to drag my hand along the hull for balance. No sounds emerged from behind his door. I nudged it as noiselessly as I could, opening it enough to drop a splinter of lamplight on the floor. His eyes were closed, his breathing regular. I edged inside and stood in the corner, one hand against the wardrobe to brace myself. He lay slumped on his shoulder, wrists bound behind him, knees bent to his hips. I don't know how long I watched him. My perception of time felt unreliable; the seconds peeled with a languorous weight.

He had a funny look to him—like a fallen statue. Perhaps it was his pink lips, the curl of hair around his ear, his even tan, as if he were carved from expensive metal, the laces around his wrists—as in revolutions, when protestors topple statues with heavy rope. I wanted to touch him.

It started with his calf. He had a lean calf and it was easy to kneel beside him and rest my hand on his leg above the rope. I pushed my hand up his shin to feel his hair. I let my palm weigh on his kneecap, which looked so vulnerable then, you could feel every pit of bone. I slid my hand further up his thigh and let it rest on the warm bulge between his legs. A thrill uncurled in my belly. I lingered my hand on his crotch, and felt the muscle fill the nook of my palm. His eyes flashed open. I whipped my arm away and scrambled to leave. He fixed his eyes on his groin, as if he still felt the warmth of my hand.

He tried to say something like “wait,” but the word was muffled by the handkerchief.

I hovered at the door. We stared at each other. He didn't appear scared. He knew I would turn back to him and remove the cloth from his mouth. I did so. The cotton was slick with saliva.

I have to pee, he said.

Was he lying? I couldn't let him go alone in the head. What if he severed the binds with the razor, or locked himself in and shouted for Kenneth? But he couldn't pee *here*. On the floor.

I'll bring you a bottle, I said.

Okay.

I found an empty pickle jar in the galley. When I re-entered the room, he had heaved himself into a seated position against the bunk. I closed the door behind me and switched on the bedside lamp. It surprised me he did not protest the binds, and I worried for a moment that he was enjoying himself—that this had been his plan all along. But when I presented the jar and said, A pickling jar for your pickle, he flinched.

I'm joking, I said.

I knelt on the rug and unbuttoned his trousers. I could not stop glancing at his face to be certain he had not rammed a paperweight in his jaw with the intention of plunging it into my skull. He shut his eyes. I lowered the zipper and opened a gap in his trousers and unbuttoned his underpants and lured the penis through the hole. Whatever hardness I'd stirred a minute ago had waned. It looked to me like a hairless rodent, too meek to venture into my hand. I lifted the jar higher. His eyelids tremored, the tendons in his neck clenched into thick lines, his entire body propped by its scaffolding.

Are you scared?

He didn't answer. It occurred to me, for the first time, "scared" was an anagram of "sacred."

After a long pause, he started to pee. The urine fell in spurts, then one ragged stream, the jar warming between my palms, filling with brass liquid. When he finished, I let him drip a few more seconds, then folded his penis back inside his underwear as quickly as I could. A drop of urine blotted through the cotton. I zipped his fly and wiped my hand on the rug, which had once been a rich thistle blue but was now coated with lint and dandruff.

Patrick slanted over his lap, his eyes fixed ahead on the door. Again, I was struck by how he did not struggle, or ask how long I would keep him here. Maybe he knew he could overpower me if he

wanted, by shoving me against the wall or clamping his jaw on my neck. I visualized both scenarios as I sealed the jar of pee and pushed it under the built-in desk.

Do you want a glass of milk? I asked.

His hairless chin and moist eyes, the shine of saliva on his lip: he looked like a child.

Okay, he said. Could you fetch my bag at the same time?

So I returned to the galley. His satchel still lay on its side on the floor. I pushed its items back into the main pocket and set it on the galley counter. It started to slide back toward me. I snatched it with irritation, slung it over my shoulder. I poured water for myself and a glass of reconstituted milk from the jar in the cooler. I listened for Joan and Kenneth's voices, but no sound seeped from the deck planks. They had stopped talking.

Back in Patrick's cabin, I crouched before him and lifted the milk to his mouth. He pulled too deep a sip and coughed, the liquid spattering my chest, dribbling between the buttons of my shirt. I dabbed the flannel with my hand. He watched. I shifted away from him to wipe the rest off.

Sorry, he said. Will it stain?

No.

I set the glass on the nightstand, which had a lip so it wouldn't slide off. He hadn't finished yet. When I turned back to him, he had folded over his lap, his arms stretched behind him.

Do you like this? I asked him.

Not particularly, he said, his head between his knees. Do you?

I'll untie you in the morning.

Why not now?

I don't trust you.

He nodded, a funny gesture upside down—his shoulders butting his knee tendons, his earlobes folding against his calves.

You may as well sleep, I said. Time will pass faster.

You could help. He lifted his head from his knees and straightened his back.

How.

He opened his thighs and bobbed his head forward and back, his mouth yawning open.

I hurled the wet handkerchief at him. —You brute.

In my bag you'll find a bottle of sleeping pills. I'll take a few if you want.

Why?

So time passes faster. As you said.

I found the bottle at the bottom, below the pouch of clothespins. The label read "Barbital," which Mom took at night too. I emptied three tablets into my hand and held it out to him. He licked them off my palm and I tipped the milk into his mouth. This time he pretended to cough, but the milk remained in his mouth.

Is that glass half-empty or half-full? he asked, once he'd swallowed.

The sweat cooled behind my ears, on the bone of my neck.

So you *were* listening.

Hard not to. He winked and slumped onto his side.

I biffed the back of his head. —Hey. I know those pills don't work that fast.

But he only smiled and rocked his cheek to rest on the rug. He lay there in silence, his eyes closed, for another few minutes.

I clenched a tuft of his hair and lifted his head. But I had nothing to say so I let go. The weight of his shoulder tipped him onto his chest. I knew he was pretending. I sat, convinced he'd lurch up and pull a face, for many minutes. By then, his sighs had deepened. I worried his torso would cut circulation to his hands, or that blood would pool in his head and clot.

I drank a sip of milk, which helped me think. We were sailing at a clip now, the vessel heeled to the right, so the whole room was slanted. I had to crouch and press my knee into the berth for balance. His hair was beginning to loosen from its bond of salt water. A strand of it fell toward his eyelashes, which

were so pale they vanished into his skin. I knelt beside him on the rug and unpicked the knot. When his arms were free, I eased him onto his back and rubbed his wrists to encourage the blood flow. He was really asleep now, his snores scraping the roof of his mouth. I drank another sip of milk. It was strange to see him so harmless, like a bee with the stinger plucked. Midnight had passed, but I didn't feel tired. I could see into the satchel on the floor, and once again scanned the contents. It was a Boy Scouts satchel, the eagle and fleur-de-lis faded on the canvas flap. Inside, a pocket was labelled, in permanent marker, *Emergency sewing* and another, *First aid*. I removed the pouch of clothespins and withdrew one. Of course they were the same pegs he had used on me—wood, a metal coil. I had never realized how sinister clothespins looked—finger-sized mousetraps. I squeezed one in my hand, pressing and releasing the prongs like a beak. Then I closed the beak on Patrick's thumb. I waited, but he didn't stir. He breathed through his mouth, his snore starting to irritate me now. I fastened a peg on his index finger. I still had the blue pock where he'd clamped the peg around my nipple. A sweat released over my arms. Before long, I had pegged every one of his fingers and the webs of his thumbs. With every pin, I felt a pang of glee. Twenty pegs remained in the bag. I rolled up his shirt. I pinched what fat I could find on his flank and clamped it. Something extra sparked when I pegged his navel—the pleasure of slotting a book into its space on the shelf, or a teacup onto its saucer—as if the whole world were built from these tiny absences that invoked the presence of something else. I realized, as I pegged the lip of skin under his navel, where a trail of hairs climbed from his underwear, that I felt aroused. I unbuttoned his trousers and unzipped his fly and pulled down his underwear. His penis hung over his testicles like a toy-sized trunk. I re-examined his body on the floor, his fingers and loose skin pinched with clothespins. I clamped another around the saggy skin of his scrotum. He stirred then. His head turned from one cheek to the other, and his brow tensed. My hand hovered over the peg. I released it and clamped the skin of his thigh instead. Then I clamped his butt cheek. When he didn't move, I tried another peg nearer to his anus, webbed with wisps of hair. Six pegs remained and I used four on his butt and thighs and one behind each knee. After, I sat against the wardrobe and observed my work. I felt a rush of disgust and couldn't tell whether I hated him

or myself—as if we were those twinned objects, the absence of one programmed into the other. To silence my thoughts, I lifted my nightgown and slid my hand inside my underwear. I agitated my fingers back and forth and clenched my buttocks and came quickly, biting my free arm to silence each wave of pleasure. Then my hand deflated and I sunk back against the wardrobe door—eyeing him in case I had been too loud. When he still didn't show signs of waking I pulled myself up and shuffled to the metal sink and washed my hands. I returned to find his penis had swollen—as though he had recognized my quick breath in his sleep. I felt such shame, I couldn't look at his face as I removed the pegs. I buckled his trousers and returned to my cabin.

*

I woke from the sound, not the impact. *Greta's* planks were screeching, a high-pitched wail like humpbacks, as if we had intercepted a pod and they were nosing into the sides of the boat, vibrating their larynges. But the groans were accompanied by a harder sound—wood splintering, popping. I rushed to my porthole and couldn't see anything. For a moment I didn't know if the blackness was sky or water. Then a frothy wave lashed the glass. The sounds grew ear-splitting as I pressed my nose against the window. But it wasn't the cracks and pops that alarmed me. I realized, with sweat prickling my forehead, that I could hear metal. Steel cables ringing against an aluminum mast, though our masts were cedar. I recognized the clanking from the marina, the tension of cables working against wind, though what I heard now was arrhythmic—a clamour. It took someone shouting outside, Joan or Kenneth, I couldn't tell, to confirm something terrible was happening.

In a panic, I remembered Patrick. I shoved past the person who shouted, not taking in their face, only recognizing a darkness, a body blocking my path, and skidded into Patrick's cabin. The boat was pitched to one side and I nearly toppled over him onto his bunk. He was beginning to stir, though I noticed the roar was softer amidships. I tried to unpick the rope around his ankles, but I had tied it too tight. My

hands rattled. Finally, I loosened the knot with my teeth and pried the rope over his heels, scraping his skin. He started to flail as I tugged him out the door. In the galley, Kenneth was helping Joan up the companionway steps. Then he reached for my hand. I let him nudge me into the wet air. Once outside, I turned and extended my arm to Patrick, who was having trouble finding his feet. He took my hand at the same time Kenneth pushed him from behind. Between the two of us, we lifted him into the cockpit.

Then all four of us stuttered to a halt. *Greta* advanced slowly, but steadily, through a fishing boat. The boat had parted in two—three passengers clambering onto the stern, which stayed afloat as the bow tipped nose first into the sea, the painted name, *Bagheera*, sinking as I read the letters and pronounced them in my mouth.

Kenneth shouted at Patrick to radio the coast guard. Then he rushed to the side of the boat and tossed a life preserver to the passengers. Joan helped him heave up the line. The first person who emerged was a boy, maybe fourteen years old, his cheeks chapped with cold, his hair dripping, eyes so wide with fear he could have been half that age. Without realizing what I was doing, I paddled him into a hug, clutched his body against mine until he stopped shaking. Joan, Patrick and Kenneth helped the remaining two on board. The last one, a Japanese man, struggled from their hands and shouted at the water. In this way, we learned that someone was missing. Kenneth shone what lights he could from the masts; Joan and I searched the galley for spare flashlights, lanterns. Then all seven of us shone beams into the waves, searching the debris for something that moved like a human, an arm batting the surf, a jaw opened for breath. We shouted his name, Erwin.

It was the boy who saw him, his blue shirt filled with sea and bloated like a sack. He wasn't responding to the preserver or our shouts. Then the Japanese man leapt into the water. He locked one arm under the man's armpits and reached for the preserver with his other, and together, Kenneth and Patrick tugged them on board. They tried to pummel the water from the man's stomach. Waves of it gushed from his mouth, but he didn't wake up.

2001

2001—San Diego, California

I barely recognize the city, aside from a few landmarks like Santa Fe Station. They've demolished many of the bungalows to carve space for high-rises. The glass reflects the sea on one side, hills on the other.

Joan asked what I was thinking, to return here. I'd been unable to answer at the time. After seven days on the road with Mom, I began to understand why. Her question conceals a larger one: why now? Why have I waited?

There are a number of biographical facts I could list, starting with graduate school at McGill. McGill's Classics Department was the first environment I couldn't blend into. I was the only woman in my MA group. I felt, at times, like a stuffed peacock—eye-catching at first, until my colleagues forgot I was there. But the moment I spoke, their heads whipped to me. And I spoke a lot. To everyone's surprise, not least my own, I had opinions about the texts, about translation, and I could articulate them. The professors didn't find me eye-catching; I worked harder to turn their heads. But I developed a friendship with an Ovid scholar from Montpellier. He supervised my MA and later, my PhD. If I posed a question in English, he responded in French, though he spoke English with his American students. We wrote letters and cards in Latin. It began when, in search of a book, he taped a note to my office door—*Ars Amatoria perdidit. Habesne est?* And I responded in kind.

I didn't leave Montreal until 1971, when York offered my first teaching post. So if I return to the question of why I waited, one answer is work. *Keeping myself busy*. Which is another way of forgetting.

My sister lives more comfortably in the present than I do. It's a sticking point between us. She calls me the White Queen from *Through the Looking-Glass*. "Jam to-morrow and jam yesterday, but never jam to-day."

She and I forgot the accident by different modes: Joan in the present, through her divorce from Kenneth, her second marriage to a radio announcer in Vancouver. I in the future—never content with the city I'd landed in, moving from Montreal to Toronto, Vancouver, until full circle back to Victoria. We'd sold the home on Salt Spring Island by then.

I guess one aspect of aging is that the future grows limited. While Joan remained preoccupied in her ever-unfolding present—her divorce, her second marriage—I looked toward the past.

A few factors inspired me to go now, rather than five years ago, or next year—to eat jam today, for a change.

First, Mom turned eighty-five this March. Her dementia was taking over, but the doctors said she was in pretty good shape, physically—a surprise to anyone who knew her. One final trip, the two of us, seemed a nice idea.

Then, of course, there was the anniversary that passed. Forty years. I had recently installed cable internet at the house and found myself *searching*. I sent an email to the U.S. Coast Guard and asked for the investigation report. I called the San Diego County Medical Examiner, whose reports were accessible under the Freedom of Information Act. I learned that the *Union* archives were held at San Diego State University.

Then there was Patrick. It didn't surprise me that I had never seen him again. We lived in different parts of the continent. We were not a family that shared reunions, and after Joan divorced Kenneth and Mom left Eugene, nothing tied us. I knew from Joan that Patrick had married a woman from Cornell. They'd lived in Oceanside with their son and daughter. What's odd is: I couldn't shake the notion that a trance had lifted that night on the boat. Patrick's imprint on me, my imprint on him: they vanished. As if the moment our relationship pressed into someone else—even if cause and effect cannot be a hundred percent conclusive—our bond severed. For both of us. Neither one attempted to get in touch. Last month, Joan passed on the news that he had died. A gas leak in the house while his wife was on a cruise to Alaska.

The library assistant loaded the microfilm reader for me. We had made the *Union's* front page. The assistant didn't mention Mom, who sat beside me with her adult picture book, *Barn Animals*. Mom had just had her medication, which made her drowsy, and I could see she might nod off soon. She lay back in the leather chair I'd wheeled from an unoccupied reception desk. It had looked more comfortable than the plastic ones.

The headline read: *2 Vessels Crash; San Diegan Killed*. The photo showed a police officer covering Erwin Powell's body with a blanket. Behind them, I recognized the boy on deck. I couldn't remember his name. *In the background, Mrs. Walter consoles her son, 13, one of three survivors from the sunken boat.*

I turned the knob to the right to advance the film.

Cmdr. Geoffrey Banks, officer in charge of marine inspection, said persons aboard Greta reported that there were no lights shining on the fishing boat when the accident occurred.

Hayashi, however, told a reporter that the boat's mast light, which could be seen from 360 degrees, was on, and so was a light on the boat's bait tank at the stern.

The boy's name, I found out, was Sammy.

From the obituary, I learned that Erwin Powell had owned a bar called the Grotto for twenty years before he sold the property to buy the fishing boat with Haruto Hayashi. I have no idea what the link was between Powell and Hayashi. Nor the link between them and Sammy Walter. I don't recall much of that night, and none of the words spoken.

Mom began to snore in her chair—a nasal rasping that I tried to ignore. I felt conscious of students glancing in our direction.

The medical examiner's office mailed me a copy of their report a month ago. Some details have stayed with me. They help me know him.

The body was that of a well-developed, well-nourished Caucasian male of the apparent stated age, and was viewed lying on his back in a Stokes litter onboard the Mexican Coast Guard Cutter #95741 at the Coast Guard Landing, Shelter Island, San Diego, California. The body was cold, in primary rigor mortis, and was clad in undershorts and a nightshirt. The body was edentulous compensated. The hair was brownish gray. The eyes were hazel, pupils equal. Numerous abrasions and contusions of the thoracic region and of the left arm were noted.

I had to look up the phrase “edentulous compensated.” It means he wore false teeth.

The body was identified by his brother:

Mr. Edward C. Powell, 1166 Barcelona Drive, San Diego, brother of the decedent, present, stated in substance that to his knowledge his brother (decedent) had no history of a heart condition. He stated further that his brother was a very strong swimmer and had participated in long-distance swims in the Great Lakes region and off the La Jolla shores. Mr. Powell stated further that the decedent was a bachelor.

I never located the coast guard report. When I phoned the National Archives, their search came up empty. The archivist said it was likely the record no longer existed, as accident reports were considered “temporary records.” There were no follow-up articles in the *Union*, either. The media must have lost interest after that first week. I can only say what I know: Kenneth and Joan were on deck. I was in bed. Patrick’s legs were bound in his cabin. Kenneth insisted he hadn’t seen lights, but I don’t know how alert he was, or distracted by his fight with Joan. Was Patrick meant to relieve him from watch? Would that have changed anything? The investigation proved inconclusive with regards to the lights. It was Hayashi’s word against Kenneth’s.

Mom was beginning to stir, so I rewound the slides, replaced the reel in its case and returned the case to the cabinet. I reminded Mom where we were before she got upset.

They make excellent Mexican food here, Mom. How about a burrito?

I suggested burritos because you could eat them with your fingers. Utensils were becoming harder for her to grip.

Grand, she said.

She linked her elbow around my arm, and we inched toward the front door. I couldn't get the newspaper image out of my head—his shape under a wool blanket.

He was unmarried. He swam the Great Lakes.

I've learned to order a side for myself, because Mom will only eat a quarter of her main. I nibbled on tortilla chips and guacamole while she attempted her burrito. She couldn't bite through the thick fold of tortilla, so I tore the whole thing open. She dabbed her finger in the paste of beans.

A young man sat next to us with a collapsible baby buggy. I would have called him a boy were it not for the buggy, the infant straddling his bicep. He ate a taco with one hand and jiggled the baby with the other. Black hair coated the baby's head. That's all I could see from my table.

The man sucked at his Coke through a straw. I could tell he was staring at me from the corner of his eye, to assess why I was looking at him, maybe. Yet I didn't want to look away. And I didn't want to say something grandmotherly, like, How old is he?

So I turned my tortilla chip in the guacamole until it was green and heavy and lifted it to my mouth.

He had a pack of cigarettes on the table, and I wanted one. The corners of his mouth were smeared with white sauce and I thought about wiping the sauce with my thumb—but that felt grandmotherly too. Then I thought about what I was wearing—my button-down denim skirt and an orange camisole, which I wore under shirts in the winter and as a shirt in the summer. I felt self-conscious. How would I look to him?

It's not that I wanted sex. He could have been my son—even my grandson. But I wanted him to look at me as a possibility, I guess.

Beside me, Mom pinched the rice with her fingers and spilled it down her chin when she chewed.

I smiled at the man.

He smiled back.

How old is he? I asked.

Six months.

He wore jeans and a white shirt. A tattoo of Jesus filled his right bicep, which I thought was a little on the nose.

I couldn't bum a cigarette, could I?

He lowered his taco and tossed the pack to me without disturbing the baby, whose cheek pressed against the tattoo.

Are you having one? I asked.

Nah, he said, nodding to the No Smoking sign in the window.

I'd already lit the cigarette and observed it now with some dismay as it burned at the end of my arm. I rubbed Mom's wrist, indicated I'd be back, and stepped outside onto the sidewalk. The sun beat onto my shoulders. Mom frowned at me through the glass. The man whispered to his baby. I smoked. I remembered how desperate she was for Roy's attention that summer.

Last year, Joan and I visited Mom for the first Thanksgiving of the millennium. We tried to make it festive, though Luke couldn't join us. Joan bought a bag of tissue-paper turkeys, the ones you find on bakery counters at Thrifty's. We planned to stay until Monday, when Joan would return to Vancouver to see her in-laws.

The first morning, I scooped coffee from a tin from the cupboard and two pearled maggots spilled out—clamping and unclamping till they burrowed back in the mound.

I gathered my senses. I tossed the grounds outside and resumed making breakfast. I had planned to surprise Mom and Joan with banana pancakes. When I located the jar where Mom kept her flour, I noticed tracks: a larva-sized tunnel down the side of the glass. I opened the jar and parted the flour with a spoon. I lost count after twenty.

They had infiltrated the oats too. A strange crumb coated the pralines—moth eggs. Six or seven larvae had hatched in the peanut butter. How long had Mom been eating that food? Either without spotting the larvae or too embarrassed to ask for help.

We went out for breakfast that morning. When we returned, Joan and I emptied the cupboards and bleached the shelves. We bought new groceries for Mom and made room for them in the fridge.

For Thanksgiving dinner I made turkey breasts stuffed with sausage and chestnuts. I didn't have an appetite—I imagined larvae carving trails in my potatoes. Joan had arranged the crêpe-paper turkeys in a row across the tablecloth. They seemed to watch us, silently tabulating.

I must have been looking at them, because Joan asked if they were bothering me.

No, I said. I guess, do we need so many of them? I feel outnumbered.

She gave me one of those looks like, *Are you losing it too?*

The same evening, Mom's facial recognition started to go. At least, that was the first time we couldn't dismiss it. She sat at the kitchen table, folding and unfolding her napkin while we cleared dishes. I was about to lift the gravy boat when she tugged my sleeve.

Honey, she said. When are you going to drive that girl home?

What girl, Mom?

It took a moment before I realized she meant Joan, scraping kale salad into a container.

She can't take the school bus. It's nighttime.

That's Joan, Mom. She's sleeping here tonight.

Like hell she is.

I asked her GP and the nurse about travel. They thought she could manage if I took precautions. First, they recommended we drive—the Miata would be less stressful for Mom than airports or train stations. I carry a bag of essentials at all times, which includes: medication, health and allergy information, a clean change of clothes, water, snacks and activities. I gave Joan and Luke copies of our itinerary with phone numbers. In the glove compartment, I keep a file with doctors' names and numbers, a list of medications and

dosages, addresses for local police and hospitals, emergency contacts, insurance information. In the backseat: her favourite jigsaw puzzle, a Discman, Anita O'Day and Patsy Cline CDs, beads, fishing line. She loves stringing beads.

We took a week—driving no more than five or six hours each day. We stopped often for peaches, cherries, ice cream. Every afternoon, we found a new motel, each with a green swimming pool and polyester bedspreads. At times, we drove with the top down, singing Patsy Cline. Mom grinned from the sun hat that tied under her chin as if we were on some great escape. At other times, she grew anxious. She wedged her hands under her bum and sat very still. Or she gripped her head to stop the wind from buffeting her ears. Then I would do up the top. I'd put a quiet CD on the Discman for her, or we would stop for a stretch. If she asked where we were, I said we were driving to California. Every time, she nodded as if that made all the sense.

It occurred to me as we drove that both Victoria and San Diego exist on a border, a southernmost tip: one nudging the forty-ninth parallel, the other a twenty-minute cab ride to Tijuana. They are mirror towns—each side resembles the other, but not quite; the images are flipped.

We're at a hotel near the Little Italy sign. We have a pleasant courtyard, where Mom and I string beads or put together her lighthouse puzzle. For breakfast, we order cappuccinos and *cornetti* from the café.

Today I write from the courtyard while Mom naps. I taped a sign to the phone with my cell number in case she wakes up, but I'll check on her when I finish my glass of wine.

A lot of boys could be Patrick, here. When I imagine how he used to be, I keep thinking of peanuts: a thin shell of armour. Sun-brown. Two faces that turn into four faces, both at each end. The Latin name for peanuts is *hypogaea*, or "under the earth."

Back in Victoria, I've been working on a translation of Ovid's *Fasti*. *The Book of Days*. I started the project in the new millennium, my first since retirement, but the house repairs have kept me busy. So has Mom. Still, I've enjoyed tinkering with the odd passage on a Sunday morning, as you would a crossword puzzle. Ovid wrote the *Fasti* as a treatise on the Roman calendar, starting with the first day of January. The work we know ends in June, though the first six books of the poem allude to the full twelve months. One of his poems, addressed to Augustus, says he wrote the *Fasti* in twelve books, and though he planned to dedicate the entire work to the emperor, his exile interrupted him. It's not clear if that's true.

I completed January this spring. The month opens with a description of the poem's theme as a calendar. Then the speaker interviews Janus, god of passageways and beginnings, namesake for the month itself. His temple, *Ianus Geminus*, stood on the main road that approached the Forum from the northeast. No archaeological remains have been found, but its depiction on coins suggests a rectangular building with two arched doors. The long sides were constructed from ashlar blocks, which culminated in a frieze of vines and palmettes. One gate faced east, to greet the rising sun, the other west. The two directions represent the god's faces—one fixed on the future, the other fixed on the past.

Here's an excerpt I've translated from the middle of Book 1: *Kalends*.

I've told you my name, now learn my shape
though you already understand it in part.
Every doorway has two sides, outward and in,
one facing the public, the other the home.
And like a doorway seated at your threshold,
who watches incomers and outgoers,
so I, doorkeeper of the divine hall,
look east and west at the same time.
You see Hecate's faces turned three ways
to guard the forking crossroads:
where I, lest I lose time swivelling my head,
see both ways without moving.

*

This morning we ordered our *cornetti* to go and found Erwin Powell's house. I parked at a nearby supermarket and left Mom in the car with the radio on and her tin of beads. The bungalow sat at the far end of a road without sidewalks. It could have been built in the thirties or forties. Or more recently, I'm not sure. The cactus would have been there, though. It looked over a century old. Maybe the cactus connects us through time, if nothing else. Erwin on one side. Me on the other.

In the poem, the God of Doorways continues:

Here, where Rome is now, uncut forests thrived,
and all this was grass for scattered cattle.

My citadel was the hill people of this age
dubbed Janiculum after my name.

I ruled then, when Earth could still bear the Gods,
and deities mingled in mortal spaces.

Justice had not yet fled the sin of mortals
(she was the last god to leave the Earth).

Honour, not fear, governed the people without force,
and it was no labour to expound the Right to righteous men.

I had nothing to do with war: I guarded peace and doorways.

And this, he said, exposing his key, was my weapon.

I'm told they have cameras strong enough to view individuals from airplanes. I always thought what you see is what you get with photographs—but really there's no limit to how close you can look. When a weaker camera takes a photo, the details simply fade as the contrast between light and dark reduces. In these images from airplanes, a grown human occupies one pixel. Imagine if you were to watch traffic: you could follow a white van the size of a Tic-Tac up the I-5 at the same time you trace another Tic-Tac along Imperial, our yellow Miata, for example, which turns left onto 28th as the white Tic-Tac exits onto 19th—and then perhaps a Mercedes turns onto Broadway, so if you imagine this aerial camera, taking photos every second with a high-resolution lens, all three of us travelling along different streets, the camera could track all our lines through space like stocks on a graph—one Tic-Tac veering onto a side street, another pulling into a drive-thru taco stand, then swerving together again until our paths converged. Two Tic-Tacs might drift side by side for years before their lines intersected.

I've had a few serious relationships, but to this day I felt most exalted with Patrick. Even that word, “exalt,” from the Latin *exaltare*: the prefix *ex* means “out or upward”; *altus* means “high.” Consider other words of the same root: “alto,” “altitude,” “altar,” the platform used in worship. But it does humans no good to be worshipped.

Another word I think about is “spinster.” From the Middle English *spinnen*, “to spin, a spinner of thread.” Before the industrial age, spinning wool provided income for a woman living independent of a man. The modern usage of the word implies someone childless, fickle, prissy, *beyond the marriageable age*, repressed. After her separation from Eugene, Mom used this word. I would say, *Technically, you're still married to Dad*, then quote Elizabeth I: *If I follow the inclination of my nature, it is this: beggar-woman and single, far rather than queen and married*. She'd reply, *Easy for her to say*.

I like the word myself. I imagine a wooden top spinning precisely on its axis.

Yesterday I walked from the Gaslamp Quarter to the harbour, then all the way down India Street to one of the Italian delis. We have a kitchenette in our room, and I wanted to pick up ingredients for dinner: fresh ravioli, oil, oregano. I bought a slab of focaccia, which I ate on the walk back. I had worn my new sandals, because it was so warm, but blisters formed on the bottoms of my feet. I removed my shoes and continued on the pavement stones, mincing across a pebbly crosswalk. They say you only know a city if you walk it. I would like to add, if you walk in bare feet.

Then I saw him. Not as he looked last time, with the bowl of his pelvis showing, the twisted ropes of his thighs, and not as he looked in the obituary photo, his hair thinned, face marbled with sunspots, a hard shell of a belly under his golf shirt, but how I imagined him still—the most sublime version of himself, hair curled from salt, shoulders the sun could rest on. He looked thirty-one, thirty-two. He had the same swimming eyes and lips as if he'd been sucking on a cherry drop. A woman in a halter sundress held his hand. Patrick had raised his kids in Oceanside—it could have been his son. Or a total stranger. He wasn't the first man I'd projected his likeness onto. And yet.

I backed into a doorway and watched the man cross the street and open the door of a white BMW and watched the woman hand him her purse as she fixed the buckle on her shoe and watched them both get in and drive around the corner. And I saw all seven characters of their licence plate, and I knew I had time to write them down. But I didn't. A teenaged girl passed me through the doorway—I was standing, I realized, barefoot in front of a 7-Eleven. I stepped out of her way. I continued walking. I tore a piece of focaccia and crunched the salt between my teeth.

When I returned to the hotel, I didn't see Mom straight away. My stomach dropped at the empty room, though I had only been gone an hour. My eyes went instinctively to the balcony, but reason clicked in and I tapped on the bathroom door.

Are you there?

She was standing in front of the mirror, brushing her hair. One lock kept falling into her eye. She'd comb it back, press the strands in place, but the moment she let go it dropped.

I drew a bobby pin from my makeup case and fastened the curl behind her temple.

I saw Patrick's doppelgänger today, I said. Do his kids live in San Diego?

She watched me in the mirror, as if this were a test and soon I would tell her the answer. I stared back at her. Her hair was thinning around the ears, revealing patches of scalp. The folds along her upper cheek and brow had begun to close in on her eyes, as if gently guiding them to shut. Beside her, the brittle creases of my own face stretched my eyes further apart. It would be too easy to say we saw our respective pasts and futures reflected, but we shared the same basic print.

I stroked Mom's shoulder. —You hungry? Italian tonight.

I turned toward the door.

Why are you walking that way? she asked.

Just a blister.

You look like a bag lady.

Where are my bags?

Under your eyes.

I laughed. Her old self burbled up now and then.

It occurred to me, later, the intimacy of tapping on a door, asking *Are you there?* Because you expect to find them. You know who you're looking for.

*

This morning, I set my alarm for seven so Mom would not wake by herself. I boiled water for coffee while

she sat on the balcony, where light raked across the concrete. I treasured those mornings when the sun still greeted you, when you woke and the sky told you what day it would be.

The café downstairs wouldn't open for another hour, so I boiled an egg for Mom, sliced toast soldiers.

Where's your father gone? she asked when I joined her outside. I reminded her he was living at a retirement home in Arizona.

Oh. She nodded slowly, but appeared hesitant.

You know, he's nearly ninety.

He's not.

You're getting on yourself, Mom.

She cut her eyes at me, but didn't ask. I didn't tell her.

You remember the last time I visited him in Yuma? I brought you tinned hominy and a record of *corrido* folk songs.

She breached the yolk of the egg with her toast and lifted it so slowly that a yellow tack hardened onto the crust before it reached her lip.

Our conversation continued. We shared anecdotes with each other. Mostly I shared anecdotes with her. When she finished, I cleared space on the table for the lighthouse puzzle. Oils from last night's ravioli still crumpled the tablecloth. I swept a few olive stones and shavings of parmesan to the floor and spread the puzzle between us.

Together, we turned each piece in our fingers until we recognized the notches.

The lighthouse overlooked a beach where foam sudsed over pebbles and beach glass. A bed of clams shifted with the tide. A pool gathered in the lap of a rock with mossy bunches of anemones and gunnel fish and barnacles. And all the life there.

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