INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA

UMI®
800-521-0600

IT'S THE GOING AWAY AND NOT THE ARRIVING

Liane Keightley

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 1999

Abstract

It's the Going Away and Not the Arriving

Liane Keightley

The stories in this collection are filtered through the perspectives of women, all in their early through late twenties, and all of whom suffer in varying degrees from estrangement and anomie. Language often proves insufficient, with a consequent breakdown in communication. That which remains unsaid becomes the impetus behind action. Yet communication, however inadequate, allows the women in particular in these stories to develop an intimacy with one another that both consoles and drives the story. Time is often fractured, temporarily held at bay. Typical measures of time are absent from the characters' lives. Many of the characters have left the city, have left "home", for more rural and unfamiliar settings. Implicit in this move is the idea that characters in fact lack a sense of "home". This is true in varying degrees from story to story. This relocation represents a retreat from the familiar rather than a movement towards the unfamiliar. Reiterated in this movement is the degree of dislocation felt by the characters and the attempt, however temporary or unintended, to escape the self.

Table of Contents

TEN-CENT PACKS

Sender's house smells faintly of urine. It's not from his dog Milo, but is the smell of an anxious child, of warm pee on unwashed trousers.

"Mona was my life," he says, "but I'll never give Milo back." He grips Milo against his chest. Milo looks sedated, her head drooping in Sender's arms and her back legs sprawling out across his lap. This is a rare moment for Milo, who is normally, happily, out of control.

On the days when I entertain Milo, we go out to my backyard and play. She has become quite fond of the sprinkler. I like to sit beneath the willow tree and throw sticks and assorted items for her to chase. This morning she brought me a sneaker that I suspect belonged to Mona. She leapt back and forth through the sprinkler with it several times before depositing it at my feet. We can do this sort of thing for hours. I am easily mesmerized by her energy, and by the smells that emanate from the garden, and my skin, when either is exposed to the summer sun.

Things get left undone in Sender's house. The dishes are growing mold in the sink and his tub is full of dirty clothes, that are, he tells me in his defense, soaking. Once in a while he

changes the water and, occasionally, I can make out a slight froth around the outer edges, which suggests he has even added soap.

Sender takes off his shoe and places his foot in the water. "Why do you stay?" he asks me. His foot moves vigorously through the murk of wet fabric, swishing it back and forth in one dark clump with a pause that is a fraction of a second longer on the back stroke. If I focus on his body and edit out the fact of the tub, the movement he's engaged in suggests something else entirely, like kicking at the pavement to get a skateboard up a hill.

"Why do you?" I ask back. But I know the answer already.

Sender is always saying she'll come back. I never talked to Mona, I knew her only by her hat, a broad, flat, floppy thing, meant for a 1940s beach. I could see it over the fence, she wore it with Jackie Os while sunbathing out in their backyard, or packing the trunk of her new lover's car with the household appliances that Sender had given her at Christmases and birthdays.

The only reason I started talking to Sender at all was because he came to my door one day covered in plaster and smelling remotely of piss and asking to borrow my garden hose. We walked around the side of the house, and I started to unscrew the hose from the back faucet.

"No no," he said, "it'll only take a second." He took off his shirt and dropped it in the grass, then turned on the hose and held it over his head. His shoulders and back were sunburnt and streaked with plaster. It was easy to see what his work was. And I already knew the essential thing about him, everyone on the street did. He was the one whose dog ripped open garbage bags put out the night

before early-morning pickup, so that we all had to get up extra-early if we didn't want our trash spread out across the pavement and consequently rejected by the garbage collectors.

"Why," I asked, confused by his presence in my yard, "don't you use your own?" He pulled the front of his shorts open and stuck the hose inside.

"My dog chewed through it," he said. His shorts sprang outwards like an inflatable ring. I liked the look of him, lost somewhere in his thirties, clearly against his will. He looked at me, unsmiling, then pulled the hose out of his shorts and shut off the faucet. He resembled a sea otter - black eyes, his hair plastered to his head and running dark and slick to his shoulders, the skinny glistening line of fine black hair merging down his chest and stomach.

"Come and meet her," he said.

Late-August mowers scream up and down the lawns. Frequently these days I find myself in the pantry staring at all the canned food I've been stockpiling since I arrived. I don't know why I do it. The stockpiling, I mean. Peas and corn and beans of all varieties, tomato paste, an endless selection of soups and raviolis, bamboo shoots, carrots, evaporated milk. Asparagus tips and clam chowder. Tinned curries and water chestnuts. Recently my head has been feeling as though it is being pressed in upon, especially with the roar of miniature motors outside. But I've discovered that if I shut the pantry door behind me and stand towards the back the noise is reduced to a single, remote hum.

During these periods, I've found myself mentally planning the menu for my winter meals. This afternoon I'm doing February. No longer surprising, nearly an hour has passed before I come out again. These sorts of things are without consequence, which is one of the benefits of living alone.

Another good thing about living alone is that when the telephone rings I don't have to answer it. I got rid of the answering machine a while ago, too much emotive clutter. I had to consider the fact of my mother, who is out there and doing her best to tap me for energy, which, when she succeeds, leaves me wilted for days.

In the garden the corn is growing tall, though I've come to suspect that it isn't corn at all. Stunted arms and formless heads, protective husks around baby corns that are gathering in size like tumors. They are grouped out back and looming as the house grows smaller. An impending riot. It's alarming, really. I've explained it to Sender but he prefers to discuss the question of how many times a person can be randomly struck by lightning before permanent internal damage becomes inevitable.

"Who do you know who has been struck even once?" I've asked him this before.

"That isn't the point," is all he ever says. But the corn still looms large and something will have to be done.

The floors of my tiny house creak and tremble when I walk, so I've taken to shuffling, careful not to move too fast. My

grandmother's photos are still on the mantle, though I've long gone through the contents of her liquor cabinet. It was stocked extraordinarily well, with back-ups hidden in the drawers beneath. Everything was in old, cut-glass decanters, and it took me a while to remember what was what.

I moved into the house when she got ill, a temporary measure six months ago, and remained after she died. It felt too sad to leave the house empty. None of my plans fit anymore, anyway.

Sender is always upset these days, and his smell is getting stronger. I do the best I can to calm him. On the afternoons he isn't working he sits inside and watches daytime dramas while Milo chases cars up and down the street. He likes to tell me who is deceiving who. I make him tuna casseroles and bring them over to cover the smell.

I brought my grandmother soup and tea for the four weeks before she disappeared, and she took to telling me that my father had been an irresponsible man. Every day she sank further into her pillows. I did what I could for her, which wasn't much. I breathed in the last of her life with her.

Her room was filthy and I tried to clean it, but she'd wake up every time and catch me. She insisted she didn't want it clean. Like holding one's breath, she said out of the blue. She didn't talk much towards the end, though she had taken to waving her hand around meekly and saying, "Take it all, take it all. You know, you look just like your mother." She knew that was a low blow. I looked

around the room. There was really nothing to take. But I said nothing, just brought her more tea. There was no reason to hurt her feelings.

The corn smells brittle and sweet, yet thick, like a throat that needs to be cleared. I catch the scent of it most often at night and it makes me wonder what I will do when the time arrives to harvest it. There are fourteen stalks, and they were unthinkingly planted to the south of the tomatoes so that the tomatoes remain shrunken and pale, a little like rotted golf balls, even though it is late in the season. I never thought any of it would grow, the seeds had been sitting in my grandmother's drawer since I don't know when. The packets said 10¢.

Mona called Sender last night while he was out playing poker and left a message on his answering machine. Milo had been left behind, banished from the group for unruly behaviour. I heard her bark several times through the open window, muffled woofs of excitement. She must have recognized Mona's voice.

Mona's message said she wanted Milo back, and would be coming for her some time soon.

Sender refuses to talk about it. Whenever I bring it up he just calls Milo over and talks gibberish to her, then flips her on her back and scratches her armpits. I don't know how he will manage.

Mrs Goody's budgie escaped last week, flew right out the back door and into the warm sunlight. She came loping out after it, shouting. The door had been left open for the breeze and the last time she had looked the bird was secure, hanging sideways from one of the curtains in the kitchen. She'd been cleaning its cage and hadn't thought of escape. She said she liked to let it have a stretch every now and again. Sender mentioned the lightning and said it would never survive. But I was thinking more along the lines of Milo. We searched Mrs Goody's yard and discovered the budgie in the birch tree at the back of the house. We tried everything, but it just ignored us. Sender offered to build it a birdhouse so it would have somewhere safe to go. Mrs Goody was smiling with relief and wouldn't stop touching his arm after that.

She has left her back door open wide every night since, hoping her budgie will retrace its path, but I suspect it won't be coming back. The nights are growing cold and already smell heavily of autumn.

"You can't smell corn while it's still on the stalk," Sender finally said to me. We were sitting in his backyard watching Mrs Goody hang out her laundry and eating popsicles he'd bought from the ice cream truck. I could tell that he'd wanted to say this for some time.

"You don't smell it?" I asked.

He sucked on his popsicle. "What, you do?" Then he repeated his initial remark about the corn. I wondered about this, then decided to dismiss it.

"What do you know about corn," I said. He just sucked at his popsicle and watched Mrs Goody.

He hasn't brought it up again, but I've noticed that recently he becomes impatient whenever I mention the garden.

During the days I wander around the house, looking at the dusty picture frames on the walls, the fading furniture, the yellowing walls themselves. I don't feel compelled to touch them, to alter them in any way. Yet depending on the day, there are certain rooms that I'm loath to enter. Sometimes it's my grandmother's room, sometimes my own. But each time I wander I discover something new. Yesterday I realized that my grandmother's smell is growing faint, and that a different one is taking over. I thought the rugs would be the best place to confirm this, but then found that I couldn't go near my own room. The rug by the couch was just like spring grass on my bare hands and the tops of my feet, so soft that there was no need for my bed anyway. I lay right down and went to sleep on the living room floor.

This morning when I woke up I spotted a glove under the couch that I hadn't seen before. I tried to concentrate on seeing it on my grandmother's hand but found that I couldn't remember what she looked like.

Milo has disappeared. She does this every so often, takes off without warning then returns a few days later stinking of whatever dead thing she has found to roll in. Sender has gotten used to it, he says, and doesn't bother to worry, but I've see him wandering

around in strange places with Milo's unused leash sticking out of his back pocket.

I've noticed Sender's attic window recently, opened wide at night, and when I asked him about it he said that he didn't have an attic. But there it is, clear as day, a small window just below the eaves of his house. When I pointed it out to him he looked perplexed, then told me I knew nothing about house construction.

I first saw it open when I got up to pee one night, after tossing and turning over dreams that had gone wrong. Sender was in them. He had come over to fix the clock for me, but instead he was nailing my grandmother to a chair. It must have been four in the morning. I've seen the window open twice again since, but Sender insists that I'm confusing dreams with reality.

Sender never mentions Mona anymore, and he never built the birdhouse he promised Mrs Goody. She has grown visibly hostile towards him and frowns severely whenever she sees him across the hedge. The days lately have been cloudy, sombre and disconcertingly still, and Sender has been acting irrational and moody. When I asked him about the birdhouse he snapped at me and said that he had only suggested it as a way of consoling her. I thought that was particularly cruel. He said I was full of shit, and since then we haven't talked much, though mainly because he has chosen to retreat into the recesses of his house, not to be disturbed.

This afternoon I found a letter in my mother's handwriting. It took me a minute to get past the strange feeling of familiarity. It's written in pencil and addressed to my grandmother, fifteen years ago, and is lonely and rambling, revealing the insignificant details of her days. When I continued looking through the drawer where I found it, I came across a half-page reply, unsent. One makes one's own bed, it begins.

The smell of the corn is so intense tonight that it has woken me from pleasant dreams of Mrs Goody's budgie riding on Milo's back through the apple orchards where Sender takes her on occasion to run. I could picture it perfectly when I first woke up, the colours of the budgie holding on tight while Milo galloped as fast as she could, her ears flowing back against the breeze. But the smell of the corn is so strong that the dream is already being blotted out, and I'm beginning to feel ill at ease. When I go downstairs and out into the backyard the smell mixes with the night air and quickly becomes suffocating. The anaemic tomatoes bend curiously over the corn, because the corn is no longer standing. My feet bleed from stepping across broken stalks.

Sender came to the door this morning covered in dried plaster and no shirt. He wanted to tell me that he'd found Milo, but he went on about the ignition in his truck for a while before he was able to say what he meant. While he talked he jiggled the knocker on my door, asked if I had a screwdriver so he could tighten it up for me. I told him to leave it alone.

"I believe in signs," he said, watching his toe through the hole in his shoe, but I told him No, unh-unh, it just couldn't be. Sender didn't want to come in and sit down, he said he had to get back to work, but he wanted me to come with him and see. "Just ten minutes," he said, and I got in his truck. The weather was starting to turn, the air shifted around and was growing cool. We drove in silence along the back roads through the apple trees, to the lot where he'd found his dog.

"I ran Milo here every day," he said with nostalgia as we got out, which, strictly speaking, wasn't true. She was under a tree, bailing twine twisted around her neck and the flies humming across her like cigarette smoke. Her eyes were still open but her head had already begun to decompose, making it hard to know for sure what was what. The wind was picking up and gusting through the apple trees. Sender crouched down to look at the moldering head of Milo, with whom he had spent so much time. A thick crust of black that must have been vomit lay beside her. Sender put his hand out and scratched behind her ears, and a smell came up that was too much, made me snap my head back and turn away. Sender pulled his hand back, holding it like a glass paperweight in the air between us. I noticed his face receding white, merging with the plaster on his hands. And the smell of the corn was with me even then, as though it had permanently seeped into my skin.

A few drops fell, not enough warning, and then it was coming down in sheets.

"It's Mona," he said. "She wanted too much." He snapped the twine off the dog's neck as the rain swept down his nose, his chin,

dripped from the overexposed ends of him. It made me weary, looking at Sender with his dog lying there rotting in front of him and the rain coming down, tensing out the air like street-level exhaust with the unmistakable odour of dead animal. I leaned my head on his shoulder. There was nothing I could say, I knew what he had done. At least the rain was driving the flies away.

If Mrs Goody's budgie is still alive, it won't be after this rain storm. I picture it in the birch tree huddled beneath scant leaves. I imagine it alone and calling out in budgie cries, for comfort.

The apple trees are dropping fruit, and the fruit thumps down and weaves across the earth. Sender places his hand in the bare, damp space behind my bent knee. His fingers stink from scratching dead Milo. The corn has been felled, razed to the ground. It was, possibly, an act of empathy, but I know it is time that I left. We lean back on slow-rotting apples and the rain comes down. Yet when I place my chin on Sender's plaster-streaked chest the smells get all mixed up. The evidence is there, and he has left his fingerprints all over the back of my knee.

FISH PARTY

When the two women opened the gate to Anton's yard they spotted Anton standing in the grass in flippers and a wet suit, his head wedged so tight into the hood that his face puffed out from the centre. He was poised with the mask and snorkel above his head when he saw Wylie and Del.

"Ahh," he said and smiled so broadly that his cheeks popped over the edges of the hood, "what do you think?" He spread his arms open in invitation.

Wylie pulled her hair back into an elastic, tucking the stragglers behind her ears. "We're off," she said without much interest, dragging her fingers across the tops of his rose bushes.

"Hey hey," he said, distressed, "hands off, you know. This isn't -" He pulled the mask and snorkel over his head and the rest of his words were lost. Wylie snapped a rose off. Anton adjusted the snorkel in his mouth and said, "'Eezuz 'riste Wiwie."

Wylie had taken to good-humouredly provoking Anton for reasons that remained unclear, except that she seemed to derive great pleasure from it. "Oh Anton," she said elaborately, pursing her lips and furrowing her brow in a world-weary way. Sometimes she

overdid it. Del wandered into the garden to see if she could catch sight of Anton's porcupine.

The three of them ended up sitting under the single tree in the yard drinking sangria Anton had tossed together out of bourbon, ginger ale, and half a bottle of red wine he'd had sitting in the fridge for a week.

"What's the point of the hood?" Del asked, watching him pry it carefully away from his head.

Wylie held the glass out in front of her and tried on different grimaces. "This is what you drink when you're twelve," she said.

"Hunh?"

"The hood. It's nearly the middle of July."

"Sneak into the liquor cabinet and mix it together in a mug so your parents don't ask."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I wouldn't have guessed the lake was that cold."

"Should they," Wylie said, "stumble upon you."

"It's very deep," Anton said with a certain awe. He paused to check himself out in the suit and seemed satisfied. "I like the hood," he said, "don't you?"

"Good God," Wylie said, raising her voice so they would listen to her. "Do you really drink this, Anton?"

Wylie and Del had been talking about getting away for a bit, heading towards the coast. They came up with Sergula: it sounded perfect, just a tiny strip of beach that no one seemed to know

about, exactly what was required. So they decided to disappear, pack up and go with no more than a few hours warning. There were things to do first though, a sequence had to be followed. Wylie hated to think about it, but Del was practical and had a point. A tent and a couple of sleeping bags had to be acquired, a flashlight couldn't hurt. Anton, they had figured, would have what they needed.

Anton began his report of the morning's events. He had spotted his fugitive porcupine and described in detail its dash for the bushes. It was just a baby wandering along by itself in full view when he'd found it on the side of the road, a couple of weeks after he'd first arrived in the spring. He'd stopped his car and gotten out, and the porcupine had shuffled along ahead of him. When he reached for it it flipped into action, rolled into a ball and lay perfectly still. A meagre defense. Anton picked it up and placed it on the passenger seat, then drove it back to his house. He carried it into the garden where he prepared it a little feast of vegetable peelings, and it had lived there ever since, appearing and disappearing. Anton never knew when he would see it next. Wylie and Del had yet to catch a glimpse of it.

Then his tone changed. He lowered his voice and shifted so that his back was facing the hedge.

"She's been doing it again," he said, and by this he meant the fifteen year old next door. He'd first caught sight of her a couple of weeks earlier, sitting at a gap in the hedge with her legs crossed, watching him.

"She's got the same tank top on every day," he said as though it were an amazing detail. And it was true, the whole summer haltered in the same piece of cloth. Wylie and Del had sat in his house one afternoon watching her watch. She had straight brown hair that she tucked compulsively behind her ears, merely a habit, like nail biting. There was fascination in her watching, she seemed entirely engrossed by Anton, whether he were in the act of watering his garden, or lying completely immobile beneath the tree.

Del had said, "You've become the object of a full-blown teenage obsession, Anton," and patted him on the back.

Pratt had grinned when he heard about it, but all he said was, "Not bad."

Wylie danced around for a full five minutes shouting, "Lady killer, lady killer," until Anton turned bright red and told her to shut up.

There was a time when Wylie hardly spoke, during the years long before she started seeing Pratt. She and Del got along well then, they both moved about watching the world in still frames and black and white. They let loose with one another though, they were like lovers satisfying a thirst. Back then Wylie worked in a convalescent home, she was there for years, cleaning up after men and women who had grown old and disoriented, who chattered away, reliving events in a present that had long disappeared into the past. One woman pleaded with Wylie every day to go to the park, wanted to know if it would be okay if her daddy were to hold her hand across the street. There was no park, and no father anymore,

but Wylie was sweet with them all. She listened while they talked, she just let them go, thinking it was all they needed and all she really could give. Often the women mistook her for their daughters, and they were happy with the mistake. Wylie never corrected them. She hugged them as hard as she dared, careful not to bruise their brittle frames.

Del used to visit Wylie at work, and there was an image she retained from one of those times, an image she could never seem to shake off, of the frailty of an old man slow-motion rising in the blue-white corridors of the home. He gripped the edges of his chair and paused, concentrating all of his energy. Then he laboriously peeled his backside off the seat, leaning his chest right into his lap and lifting, lifting. His arms shook with the effort. An 80 year old woman with a permanent one-sided shrug held out a hand, paper thin and light as air. She occupied the seat beside him. He reached for the hand slowly and held it. A moral support. There was tenderness in that gesture.

When Del turned to Wylie, Wylie was looking straight at her and her face registered no change. Wylie had seen it a thousand times and knew. The residents were waging a constant war with their bodies and had already begun the slow retreat.

Wylie had taken to Anton as though he were a long-lost sibling. It seemed to Del that a contained inner panic had risen like an air bubble to the surface and disappeared. Wylie exhibited the energy of a hyper child, taking Anton over as though he were

hers, and Anton seemed to think she was extraordinary. They had things in common, it seemed.

They spent hours together in Anton's yard, Wylie teaching him how to play chess. Del was usually with them, propped up against a tree reading. Pratt came and went, smoking one cigarette after another, as though he weren't sure what to do with himself.

"Pratt," Wylie shouted, "sit down for chrissake, you're making me nervous." Pratt wandered over to the chessboard and watched for a few minutes.

"Move your knight and you'll have him in check," he said. Wylie looked at the board for another minute then moved the knight.

"Check," she said. She looked up at Pratt and grinned. "You've got that killer instinct I love," she said almost gleefully. Then she grabbed his hand and pulled him down beside her. She kissed him open-mouthed just long enough to make Anton rise abruptly from his chair and begin carefully inspecting his tree.

Anton's tree was an apricot tree, heavy with young fruit. When he arrived in spring, it had been the tree that decided it for him, white blossoms out before anything else. He said it was the perfect antidote for what he had left behind.

The fruit grew and Anton watched, every morning. Stretching and yawning, he walked out of the rented house in his boxer shorts, his first conscious act of the day, to assess the tree's progress. He rolled his fingers across the hard fruit, satisfied. And then he

would laugh; the tree always made him giddy, he said. He said the tree was unstoppable. He told and retold the details.

"Kick the ball over the fence," Anton had shouted from his yard, and Pratt on the other side had obliged. This was how they had met. The soccer ball flew over the tall wooden fence and the rhododendrons and bounced across Anton's yard. Anton was beside himself with excitement. He ran after the ball, grinning.

"Wait wait," he shouted as he ran, "I'm gonna kick it back."

Pratt waited on the other side. He had been toeing the ball around by himself, and then this shout from across the fence. He was out in the countryside laying low, living in his uncle's house for the summer. Keeping away the vandals, his uncle had called it, while the uncle travelled to Alaska to see a sun that never set. The ball appeared, soaring far above the top of the fence and passing diagonally over Pratt. It bounced once and cleared the bushes onto the road. Pratt heard the swerve of bicycle tires and the long-drawn squeal of brakes, the ding of a bell as the handle bars hit the ground. Then the high-chiming voice of a boy saying, "Where the *fuck'd* that come from?"

Anton and Pratt both ran out onto the road where the boy was already back on his feet and inspecting his bike for damage.

"Why don't you watch what you're doing," he said. He scowled at them and continued his inspection. Anton pleaded his guilt, but the boy just kept on scowling until finally Pratt was able to placate him with a cigarette.

The three of them sat together on the curb, smoking in ritual silence. Then Anton, who didn't normally smoke, stubbed his out and

got up and started kicking the ball around on the road, and soon the three of them had a game going.

Both Pratt and Anton continued to tell this story with a satisfaction that was difficult to interpret. Wylie asked what the hell they were doing giving cigarettes to a little kid.

Wylie always said that Pratt's biggest problem was that he had no respect for anyone. He was good at discovering people's shortcomings, he went about it as though unearthing a dirty secret, and once he'd done that he could never look at you the same way again. Anton seemed to be the one exception, possibly because Pratt had never come across anyone quite like him before. He didn't pretend to anything, Anton was always exactly himself. His weaknesses didn't sit across him like scabs waiting to be picked; he knew what they were and carried them with him, paper hats at a party. Pratt seemed almost happy in Anton's company. He seemed, almost, like a little boy with a crush.

The wind often blew all the lawnchairs over in Pratt's yard, but he never did anything about them.

"Leave them," he would say if Wylie or Del went around gathering them up. He'd flip one over and sit in the toppled landscape of chairs playing his uncle's banjo. When Anton was over, they'd make up silly lyrics for serious songs or else break spontaneously into advertising jingles from their shared childhood televisionscape of the 70s. But when he was sitting out in the yard by himself, he would pluck despondently at the strings, singing under his breath to a private melody.

Del and Pratt didn't talk much, a commitment to silence seemed to exist between them without anything ever having been said. They were unalike in most ways, yet in temperament were like two circles intersecting. Only once, hours after Wylie had gone to bed and Anton had taken off to see if he could catch a moon-lit glimpse of his porcupine, only that once did they talk in full-blown sentences, one flowing out of the other and hinting at unconsidered eloquence.

Pratt told Del about the alleys of his youth, how he used to break into ground floor apartments and burn the paint off the walls with furniture stripper, break every lightbulb in the place but one, not the first but the second switch the returning victim would reach for. They would step through the door into a sense of things misplaced, a growing unease, aware that something was wrong. The vandalised walls and broken bulbs, lampshades politely removed like hats in passing, he did this he said because it jangled nerves, and he had thought it a sound way to make people open their eyes and pay attention.

He always paused upon first entering an apartment, looked around hopefully and imagined that its occupants understood what he understood. He would touch the framed photos of family, the linen cloth spread across a table. He imagined it billowing above the wood and touching down gently, folding and collapsing like a landed parachute, a single wrist flick in anticipation of a shared supper. He'd finger the back of a well-worn chair comfortingly then notice that it was giving audience to a blank television screen, and all the old anger would come back and he would set about his task.

All it seemed to do, though, was increase the number of bars on windows and the size of warning stickers on frosted glass. He never took anything, only once, and that ended the whole business for him, he said, made him ask himself what the hell he thought he was doing.

Del spoke mostly in colours that night, telling Pratt things that hadn't been told in a long time, travel stories, but not about places. About riding an elevator in an Ontario hospital, and her fellow passenger, an elderly woman, pushing the emergency button. Del could still see it perfectly, the sky blue gown slipping forward as the woman leaned in towards the elevator buttons, a bare, sagging bottom revealed. The fire bell deafening while they sat together between floors, the woman insistent saying she must know why Del looked so sad, resting her palsied hand on Del's; and Del, not knowing the woman, and without any exchange of names, telling her everything - partly because the fire bell made her edgy, but equally because it drowned her out, made revelation seem plausible. She didn't reveal to Pratt the things she'd told the woman, not really. He didn't seem to require it. But she said she had felt a weight lifted off her once she was back on the ground, the alarm silenced, had experienced a strange, protracted relief, and Pratt nodded his head slowly, just sat back in the couch and nodded, right past the end of Del's story.

They fell asleep perpendicular to one another with the first hint of light outside, one on the couch, the other in the armchair beside it. Del woke up only a few hours later, with the feeling

that she had slept a full and sound night's sleep, and that's the morning she first met the girl from the hedge.

Del had risen from the couch fully alert, with an energy that compelled her outdoors, past the empty church and down to the lake, where she spread herself out in the sunshine. The water slapped against the shore. There was the low drone of a motor boat on the far side of the lake, and voices amplified, children splashing in the water further along the shore. The sounds of a summer day.

"I know you," a voice said once Del had settled on a rock overlooking the lake, a book in her lap. It was the girl from the hedge. Del hadn't seen her sitting there beside the tilt of an old, beached rowboat, and she looked at the girl and smiled. "I know you, you know," the girl said again, and the way she said it, a veiled threat, made Del's smile fade.

"I recognize you too, you live two houses over."

The girl looked at Del for a moment, said, "You don't live there," then turned back to the beads she was feeding onto a string. Her fingers moved methodically.

"What," Del cleared her throat after watching the girl for a while, "what are you making?" The girl picked up a bead, fed it onto a string, reached for another, threaded it on, then another, and another, flashing crystals and thin, bright colours. She ignored Del completely, looking down at her work, her young fingers working the beads in the summer light. The church bells rang out.

The motor boat raced across the lake trailing a waterskier behind it, a slow arc of rope keeping the taut distance between skier and driver. The boat and skier chased past and the sound of

the motor thinned out as they moved towards the far side of the lake again. Del heard the faint, tinny crash of music and turned towards the girl, realized that she was wearing headphones. She was still busy, her head bowed towards her work. Beads were picked up and swiftly examined, fed onto the string or rejected for another. The girl looked different now, nothing like she had when Del had watched her framed in Anton's hedge. Del got up and left the lake, feeling young and menaced, intimidated by the girl, remembering moments in high school she had long ago chosen to forget.

Anton said ponderously, "I think he's lost, my little porcupine."

Wylie was mixing Sidecars with the flourish of a seasoned bartender, adding bourbon from a great height. "I wouldn't worry," she said, "if he is a boy. I'll bet he's off doing it with all the local girl porcupines."

Del smiled. "Spiritual quest?" she said, pulling the ice tray from the freezer.

"Crisis of faith. You know, God is Dead and all his relatives are living it up back in the old country from whence I rescued him."

"Stole him," Wylie corrected.

"Same thing."

Del said, "I doubt he's even aware that he's been transplanted."

"Possibly," Anton said, though he didn't sound convinced. He leaned against the counter and watched Wylie. He had a way of

looking at her that made Del feel a little sad for him, and he looked at her that way now. Wylie raised her head abruptly and caught him at it, then passed out the drinks. Anton didn't seem to realize how much he sometimes gave himself away.

Del thought for a moment of the young porcupine rolled up in a ball, immobilized in times of distress. She said, "Is there a separate word for a female porcupine?"

Wylie said Sow, Cow, Mare. Anton said Ewe, Vixen, Bitch. Wylie hooted with delight and Anton seemed momentarily bewildered.

But none of them really knew.

Anton and Pratt had a casual morning ritual that had been established when it was just the two of them, before Wylie and Del had arrived. Every second day after their morning coffees they would meet outside Anton's gate and head down to the lake. They would push out onto the water in a weather-worn rowboat that belonged to Pratt's uncle and find a quiet spot some distance from shore. Then they'd cast their fishing lines and sit back in the sunshine for two or three hours. They never caught much, but Del and Wylie could sometimes hear the muffled stream of conversation and laughter echoing off the lake.

"Anton's turned me down," Wylie said, standing in the doorway to the kitchen eating a plum. Del was pouring water into the back of the coffee maker and didn't look up at Wylie.

"They're fishing this morning," Del said.

Wylie rolled the plum pit around in her mouth. "Yeah, I know."

Del scooped coffee into the filter and flicked the switch on the machine. She turned her attention to Wylie, who had the plum pit poised between thumb and index finger and was taking aim at the garbage can across the room. "You're making things difficult for him, you know," Del said.

Wylie lobbed the pit into the narrow mouth of the garbage can.

Lately Pratt had failed to appear at the gate, and Anton would pace back and forth waiting, wondering what had gone wrong. When he stood in the doorway of Pratt's house with his fishing pole and tackle box and homely beige hat found on the beach, Pratt would turn away towards the living room, muttering vaguely about it being too hot on the lake.

After a few days of the same response, Anton developed a slight nervousness that he attempted to mask with jokes. "Come on, waterlily, you won't melt," he'd say, and it seemed to be working for the time being.

The countryside took Anton over. He went on long solitary walks through the woods and returned with his pockets bulging. The acorns, the pine cones, the coloured rocks and moss samples were all bounty worthy of his front step, where he spread them out as a sort of exhibit for his visitors. In the afternoons he ambled down to the lake like a country squire, fishing rod slung across his shoulder as though it were a finely crafted hunting rifle. Wylie and Del laughed whenever they caught sight of him.

And so it wasn't really a surprise when, sitting with them still beneath the apricot tree, he said, "I'm going to have a party," and sipped his sangria, "a fish party. Invite all the crabby neighbours." He leaned back against the tree and stretched his legs out in front of him. He watched Wylie and Del for a response. Del wondered what the landscape of his imagination must look like, and what it was he had left behind. They had only known him a month, since they had come up to stay with Pratt, but there was an odd intensity to that time that made it feel like an age.

"And your fellow there," Anton said, nodding at Wylie who had sprawled out on her stomach, "he's going to come fishing with me." He looked over at Del and smiled conspiratorially.

"Does my fellow know this yet?" Wylie said, her eyes closed and her head resting on the backs of her hands.

"He bitches too much," was all Anton chose to say.

"We won't be here," Del said, "we need," and she looked straight at Wylie, "to get away for a bit." Wylie nodded, her eyes still shut, knowing that they were both looking at her.

"Oh crap," Anton said. He stuck his index finger into his glass in an attempt to remove a bug. "You can't leave yet, I need you."

"It's better," Wylie said, "you and Pratt can bond while we're away."

Del hadn't seen Anton annoyed before. It was subtle, he was doing his best not to show it, but there it was.

"We have to," Del said, "Pratt's a mental case." she looked at Anton and he smiled.

"And Wylie is also a mental case," he said, and then Wylie, her eyes still closed, smiled too.

On the night of the three-quarter moon, two days before, Wylie had stood on the roof of Pratt's house and promised, had screamed, that she would jump off it if he didn't shut up. They had been fighting all evening, each insisting that his or her argument was the more valid, and introducing new points that would prove it. It was always the same thing. Pratt would never give in. His threshold for argument was high, but his position was weak that night and Wylie couldn't believe he refused to back down. She stood on the roof in full view, the moon hanging in the sky above her.

"So jump," Pratt had said, and stormed off into the night.

Wylie wouldn't come down, so Anton and Del went up and sat with her until the sun began to rise. It was a lovely place to be in the early morning, everthing quiet and new, and Wylie's mood suddenly changed, so they climbed down and went to the lake where a thin mist was still rising off the water.

Del wondered how to account for what lay between people. There were so many things that only made it half-way. Pratt and Wylie couldn't get along, but they wouldn't let go either, wouldn't even think of it. And Del knew she was no different, removed from a drama back home that would never play itself out.

"I've lost my love," was what she had said to Anton when he'd asked. They were sitting together under his tree on a night that

seemed long ago, sharing a glass of whiskey. She had said it so it would sound like a joke, but he wasn't taken in.

"Me too," he said. He took her hand and held it.

Anton was cautious in his affection for Wylie. He conscientiously included Del wherever Wylie left her out, and there was a muted quality to his enthusiasm whenever Pratt was with them. It was a balancing act for him, Del could see.

After a fight with Pratt, Wylie would often enlist Anton as an unwilling ally, which didn't win him any points with Pratt.

"Anton," she would say, "tell your friend he's an ass." Anton looked a little miserable when she did this. He tried to step out of the middle of it where Wylie had selfishly placed him, tried to back away with an apologetic smile, waving his hands for the two of them to work it out alone. But Pratt seemed to hold it against him anyway.

There was a morning when Anton had come out of his house to check on the tree and had found it abused, plastic bags filled up with dirt, rusty metal parts, broken chunks of concrete, strangled at the neck and hanging from the branches. He couldn't explain it.

"Why would anyone do this?" He sounded hurt, as though it pained him that he been unable to protect his tree against vandals. Wylie set about untying the bags while Pratt and Del stood watching. Anton was pacing across the grass, unable to bring himself near the hobbled tree.

Pratt said, "It's a bushy thing, though, that tree," and after a moment Wylie froze. She stood completely still, looking at a bag full of rocks hanging from a branch in front of her.

"This isn't your tree, is it," she said to Anton.

"Of course it is," he said, "what do you think?" He hoisted up his boxer shorts defensively.

"I think you rent," she said a little aggressively, "and this isn't your tree."

No one knew what she was talking about. "The landlord for chrissake," she finally said. "These are weights." She waved her hands towards the sky, "Otherwise the branches grow straight up out of reach," as though she were instructing the brass section to pick up the tempo. Her tone declared them idiots for not having figured it out for themselves.

Wylie's moodiness became more pronounced. She snapped at Anton in a way she hadn't before, and teased him if he revealed that he'd been hurt by it. Del wasn't sure what to make of it.

She wanted to talk more with Pratt, if only to step away from Wylie and Anton's curious battle of wills, but lately he had seemed embroiled in some inner dialogue, arguing vehemently with some aspect of himself. He was difficult to approach at the best of times, but lately there had been something mournful about him.

Del had been informed one afternoon in no uncertain terms that Wylie and Pratt had, according to Wylie, an "understanding". It had been a bad day already, it seemed to Del.

"No no," Wylie had protested to Del after finding out belatedly about her and Pratt's night together talking until dawn, "it's all right. Pratt and I have an understanding." Everyone had seemed a little cranky and restless lately.

"We were talking, Wylie, I thought you'd be happy we were getting along." Even so, Del had felt awkward telling her about it.

"I'm not his keeper," Wylie snorted, "he's free to do whatever he wants."

"Wylie," Del pleaded, "please don't do this." But Wylie's features had already twisted themselves up into her defensive-innocent Do What? face, and there was nothing to do but leave her alone for a while.

Anton had everything they needed, so they packed up their bags and headed for the main road. The neighbours seemed to have an idea of who they were and made a wide path around them. It was the scenes between Wylie and Pratt that caused all the suspicion. "Those Four at the bottom of the road," was how Del had overheard them described by a neighbour in the grocery store. The way she had uttered it, the intonation said it all. The renter and the hangers on.

And there Del and Wylie were with their thumbs out for a ride. From the looks on some of their faces you'd think the two women had dropped their shorts and flashed them.

At almost precisely the moment that Wylie said, "My arm's getting tired," a shining 18-wheeler passed them then slowed, brakes squealing, tires crunching onto the gravel shoulder.

"Never heard of it," the driver said when Del asked him if he were going as far as Sergula. Neither Wylie nor Del could remember where they had first heard of the beach. They had an idea of where it was supposed to be, but that was all.

"I can take you half-way," the driver said, "but I'm heading south after that." So they went half way in the glinting 18-wheeler.

Wylie and Del taught the driver a word game that he played with enthusiasm for the first twenty minutes of the ride. He lost interest after that, and fell into monologues about the hazards of the road, the collapse of his first marriage, and his frustrated despair over his daughter's delinquency. Wylie interjected with stories of her own, telling him things even Del hadn't known. She described a bar brawl she'd been involved in, how the guy she was with had pulled her into the fray, had thrown her between himself and his opponent in the hopes that he wouldn't hit a girl. This was nearly a decade ago when she was at the end of her teens. He swung but Wylie was quick, she ducked out of the way and as a sort of afterthought swung at the side of his head and got him in the ear. Her knuckles hurt for a week. She left the bar and never saw the guy she'd arrived with again. The driver laughed and asked her questions about the boyfriend, told her she was a girl with courage and fight, the two things you need to keep your head above water. Del was quiet for most of the trip, lost in stories of her own that wouldn't have borne the telling.

At the half-way point they got down from the enormous truck, waved goodbye to the driver as the truck heaved back onto the road.

They we're picked up almost right away by another truck going almost as far as they needed to go.

Anton had offered them his Dodge, then awkwardly withdrawn it half an hour later. Del had had a hand in that.

"Pratt won't see the kindness in the gesture," she said to him after Wylie had gone off to pack her things.

Anton placed his hand over his mouth for a few moments, like a man in deep contemplation. "No?" he said at length, speaking through his fingers.

"I don't think so."

Anton crossed his arms over his chest, his hands wedged into his armpits defensively. He hung his head. "What am I supposed to do," he said. He sounded defeated.

"I don't know if there's anything you can do at this point," Del said, and only then did the full extent of the situation occur to her.

When Del had mentioned the trip to the sea to Pratt, he didn't seem to know about it, and didn't appear to care. She found him sitting out in his front yard, his hands crossed in his lap and his head tilted back towards the clouds. The newspaper lay unread in the grass at his feet. The yard was a field of neglect, dandelions everywhere, mid-shin high. Del picked up the paper and began flipping through it.

"You can have that if you want," Pratt said, still watching the clouds.

Del looked at him doubtfully. "You've already read it?"

He looked briefly towards the fence then crossed his arms over his chest. "I already know more than I'd like to."

"It's just for a couple of days," Del said, and Pratt started shaking his head half-way through her sentence. There was a look about Pratt just then that Del couldn't identify, a look that made her very slightly nervous.

No one had heard of Sergula. The two of them walked from restaurant to café to store along the waterfront, their knapsacks weighing on them with each unsuccessful inquiry. The afternoon disappeared as they hitched their way further and further along the coast.

A car dropped them off in a quiet spot by the sea. Slender trees leaned away from the water. It was already evening by then, and the light was beginning to fade. They found a good spot and pitched the tent, then headed towards the lights down the road.

They found a place that had set up outside, candles everywhere and dim lights strung overhead, where they sat down and ordered salad and beer. All the tables had been dragged outside, dinner on the beach, and two of the tables were occupied by aging couples picking unadventurously at their food. Wylie and Del sat looking at each other through the transformative shadows created by candles wedged into the sand at the foot of the table. The waiter, who was also the owner, came out with their beer and salad and asked if they would allow him to bring them a plate of fish, something he had prepared himself. It was more a statement of

intention than a question because he disappeared before they could answer and returned a moment later with an enormous plate draped with lettuce and an entire barbecued red snapper across the centre. Capers and lemon wedges were strewn across the fish like confetti. The owner told them it was a gift but that they musn't tell anyone. "I see no reason to waste it," he said leaning in toward the table, a hint of wounded pride as he spoke, and from this they gathered that the fish had been ordered and turned back by an earlier customer. He was so pleased with himself that they didn't have the heart to ask him what was wrong with it.

They discovered that there was nothing wrong with it. The fish was delicious. And somehow dinner turned into a party, with water in wine glasses and the centrepiece fish, and a family of cats, a mother and two kittens, collecting under the table and pawing gently at Wylie and Del. They ate the whole thing, slipping bits of it to the cats, who remained under the table even after it was finished, licking their paws and cleaning their faces, the kittens draped in play across Del's feet.

Later they stood beside the sea, Wylie saying how all meaning was context and she could never bring herself to believe in individual words. There was only their voices aimed into the dark. They took off their clothes and walked into the sea, floated on their backs, not speaking, breasts exposed to the moonlight. It felt good to be by themselves in the sea at the other end of the day.

"We can't ever avoid lying," Wylie finally said once they were out of the water and dressed again. She sounded worn out. "Not

you specifically," she added before Del could start defending herself. She lifted a hand to her face. A breeze had picked up. They talked by the water until every sound had been swallowed by the wind.

Del was dreaming but it wasn't a dream, she was dreaming and waking to the sound of the water crashing over the rocks. She was dreaming half-awake of being with Wylie and Anton by the lake in the afternoon. She and Wylie were lying stretched out on the pebble shore with towels tented over their faces to keep the sun off, and Wylie had been quiet for a long time, looking off towards Anton crouched down by the edge of the water in his swimming trunks.

"He doesn't burn," she said. She didn't seem to be talking about the effects of the sun.

Wylie and Anton were allies of a special kind. Secrets had been shared, Del could see. And Anton really cared for Wylie, even Del could see that. She had watched his struggle, and knew how hard he'd worked to dismiss what he felt.

She took his watch. His arm was stretched palm up across the rocks as he dozed, and Wylie leaned over and undid the strap. Anton opened his eyes and looked at what she was doing, but didn't move to stop her. She didn't make a show of it either, just leaned back and closed her eyes, the watch on her belly beneath her hands.

Del couldn't figure it out the next day. She tried to ask Wylie but Wylie's face remained blank. The wind was set against questions.

Plastic chairs had been knocked on their backs outside the store. Del and Wylie bought some juice and a box of digestives for breakfast and sat in the chairs eating into the wind. It was gusting full force off the ocean, and even the people inside the store clicked their tongues and told them it had gotten out of hand. Wylie was trying to talk, but her words were drowning in the wind. She was saying how it reminded her of, something, Del couldn't hear what, then she caught the words Montreal, and winter, and she was back on track for a moment, had a possible context for Wylie's one-sided conversation. And it was, it was true, the feeling of being overdressed against the cold, one's freedom of movement restricted by too many layers, by ice under foot. Every movement a conscious effort. The wind had that effect, but the assault was felt primarily in one's ability to think, making ideas nearly impossible. Del couldn't really hear what Wylie was saying, just words, unconnected, here and there. The wind took all the voice out of her even as she spoke, and yet gave an urgency to everything that was said, to all the middle words gone missing.

Del had found Wylie in the Berenice Apartments, one winter evening years before. Sunk in the bathtub unconscious; drunk, too many pills in her stomach. For a long time Wylie insisted it was an accident, simple stupidity, but Del would not believe her. She had had a key of her own and quietly moved in after that, spending all of her nights asleep beside Wylie, terrified that she might lose her. In the mornings Wylie made them both coffee, brought it into the bed where she would whisper her dreams to sleepy Del, tangling

them into Del's half-conciousness so that a more complicated residue of dreams remained.

For a while the days were dreary and dark and not as cold as they might have been. On the days when Del wasn't working the two women kept the curtains drawn, turning on lamps at ten in the morning. This perpetual state of dusk provided an odd comfort, made it feel as though the outside world were inconsequential. They spent their mornings reading, at least Del did; Wylie would pull two or three books off a shelf, drop them into the armchair, then spend the rest of the morning wandering quietly around the apartment, examining her and Del's things as a cat would new objects in its territory. In the afternoon, Wylie would finally lie down, and Del would pick up one the books from the armchair and read aloud until Wylie fell asleep. It never took long. After that Del would put on her coat and boots and close the door carefully behind her, disappearing for never more than an hour. Sometimes on her return she would open the door to the sound of running water, and for half a moment she would recognize a hollowness at her centre, a rock dropped from very high. But, always, Wylie had just risen from her nap and was running a bath she had not yet stepped into.

Wylie tried to hide her misery during their month together, and she did it with a vexing calm. Del, meanwhile, lived schizophrenically, caught in the embrace of a humid affection while dwelling in a constant state of dread. In retrospect it was a frightening time for Del. Yet while she was living it, walking through that door to an unimaginable loss, momentarily real then

instantly reversed, she thought she would never be so happy again. Then one day the sun came out, really came out, and Wylie threw back a curtain and settled into the armchair to read.

When Wylie moved out of the Berenice Apartments, everything, all the moments, seemed to contract, as though life were back to normal. But every now and again Del would look at Wylie and wonder. And the feeling she had was a bit like that of being by the sea: cut off from Wylie, not understanding because Wylie wouldn't give her the information necessary. Maybe she simply couldn't. Lost somewhere in the maze of Wylie's brain was the episode in its entirety, the build-up of pressure, the myopic view. But Del was on the outside of it, kept there by the constraints of time and space and Wylie's silence. After the incident and their month together in that apartment, Del, in a way, became afraid of Wylie. Very slightly.

"Some things you can never quite shake off," Pratt had said during their night together, talking about some vague aspect of his own experience. But in her memory Del would hear him often, and the idea had attached itself, however tenuously - the skier to the boat - to her barely perceptable, barely remembered, fear of Wylie.

The coastline passed through the open window of another truck. This driver hadn't heard of Sergula either, and he dropped them off at the best place he could think of.

All along the coast, it seemed, the wind was gusting hard. They set up the tent, knots doubled and pegs hammered deep at sharp angles against the wind. They waded into the ocean and swam hard

with intent, side by side, a competitive burst all the way out across rough water and back.

At four in the morning Wylie was shivering so hard she woke Del up. Del spooned her for a while, trying to share her body heat, but Wylie couldn't get warm enough to sleep. They unzipped the tent and walked down along the water. The wind had died down and the night was quiet, the water shushing up and down the beach. The moon lit up everything. Del and Wylie could make out the vivid red on an empty Coke can, the cerulean blue of an empty cigarette pack. Anchored boats rocked lightly on the water under the moon.

"Where are we exactly?" Wylie said, and Del took her to mean that they could be anywhere at all, there was nothing in particular to locate them, because that was what Del herself had been thinking.

Later, back in the tent, they listened in the dark to the rush of the ocean up and down the beach.

"What does he ever do," Wylie whispered, "but sit around pretending to be superior, defending himself like a fortress. No one's allowed in."

"You're allowed in," Del whispered back. "And Anton." But she knew that wasn't true.

"It doesn't work that way."

"Then how?"

Wylie sighed, then whispered so quietly it was almost inaudible. "There is no defense." And Del thought about walls and fortresses and bodies of water, for the few moments before she fell asleep.

The trucker who carried them all the way back said, "Isn't that a beach in Greece?" He pulled a stack of postcards from under the passenger seat, one hand still on the steering wheel, and shuffled through them until he'd found the one from his niece.

"Here," he said, and tapped the postcard with satisfaction. And then suddenly Wylie was saying with animation, as a thing newly revealed, that it was her mistake, someone had mentioned it to her and she must have forgotten that they had been talking about beaches in Greece. Del couldn't help listening to her and thinking that she was lying, because Del had it in her head that it was her doing, this abortive search, that the mistake had been hers and Wylie had leapt ahead and assumed responsibility.

Pratt and Anton were lying on the living room floor when Wylie and Del got back, empty bottles all over the place and jaunty 20s banjo and cornet music screaming from the speakers. When Wylie and Del walked into the room Pratt reached for a couple of empty wine bottles and clanked them together in the air above him in greeting, shouting, "BACON 'N' EGGS" then losing his grip on one of the bottles. Anton laughed maniacally and shouted back, "I'M COMING VIRGINIA" even louder. They were drunker than either Wylie or Del had ever seen them, Pratt's uncle's Bix Beiderbecke records spread out across the room with one spinning on the turntable switched up to full volume. Wylie laughed when she saw the two of them and kneeled down beside Pratt holding two fingers up in front of his face. He mouthed something, then closed his eyes.

It rained hard that night. They left Pratt and Anton passed out downstairs and got into the big bed together to sleep. Wylie kept her hip pressed against Del, something she had always done, but there was no whisper of words the way there usually was. They fell asleep to the low-rolling rumble of thunder.

Del was up early after complicated dreams that had left her disoriented. She took Anton's keys off the kitchen table and made her way around to his house to borrow milk for her coffee. She paused at the gate when she spotted the girl across the yard, half-way through the gap in the hedge. She was crouched down, holding something out in her hand, little arm bounces up and down that made no sense until Del spotted a hedgehog nervously edging its way towards the hedge. The girl inched back and the hedgehog inched forward, back and forth until she had lured it all the way through the gap. Anton had gotten it wrong. All this time he'd thought it was a porcupine. Del waited until they had both disappeared from sight before going up to the house.

The cellar door hadn't been shut properly and had swung itself wide open. Del noticed it because Anton was always meticulous about closing it, afraid he would sleepwalk and tumble down the stairs. She leaned cautiously into the living room and looked around. Lamps had been knocked over and their bulbs smashed, all the cushions had been pulled off the couch and scattered around the room. It looked as though a playful wrestling match had gotten out of hand. Del took the milk from the fridge, shut the cellar door and left.

"My porcupine has disappeared," was the first thing Anton said once he had woken up. "Gone," and he waved his hand through the air as though it were a magic trick. He hadn't seen it in days and was convinced it had disappeared for good.

Del was getting water from the tap. "It's not a porcupine," she said, but she said it quietly, and neither Wylie nor Anton seemed to have heard.

"It's all grown up now," Wylie said, and she said it as if she were really considering it, and for once she wasn't kidding.

Anton saw that she wasn't, and embraced Del in mock despair saying, "My baby's gone away." He sounded, very slightly, hysterical. Wiley simply looked at him, annoyed.

"I'll tell you what, Wylie," Anton said making an obvious effort to stay calm, but he never actually told her, because Pratt walked into the kitchen just then looking like hell and grumbling about coffee.

The question was put to Pratt. "No one showed," he said, settling back with his feet up on the coffee table. "They didn't even politely decline." He and Anton had gone fishing two mornings in a row, had gotten up before dawn and paddled out into the middle of the lake. Pratt had sat shivering until they gave up and paddled back to shore. He had had to put up with Anton snug and warm in that ridiculous suit, he said. In the end they had driven into town and bought the fish for the party.

Del asked him if they had seen the girl while she and Wylie were away.

"No," he said, "not really."

"Not really?"

"You know, here and there. Not in the hedge, though."

The mood was sullen and quiet for the rest of the day, and Del never got around to telling Anton about his porcupine.

Anton and Pratt didn't speak much over the next few days. When Wylie asked Pratt to come down to the lake with the rest of them, he refused as he always did, but more adamantly than usual.

"Anton is a pain in the ass," he said, and that was the end of it. Anton, too, seemed to have little use for Pratt.

"Maybe they're in competition for the affections of our teenage neighbour," Del suggested. She was making a joke of it, but once she'd said it aloud, somehow it didn't seem so implausible. Wylie had nothing but a sour look for the idea.

Every time Del thought of the teenager next door, something in her began to squirm away. The girl unsettled her in ways Del couldn't explain.

"I don't understand it," she finally told Wylie one evening down by the lake. They were sitting on the rocks watching the sun drop over the water. Wylie smiled, looking out towards a lone ragged sailboat becalmed in the middle of the lake.

"You didn't know me then," she said. "I was that kind of teenager." The sailor wiggled the rudder back and forth, looking for wind, trying to get a start. "My parents must have hated me."

Del pictured her in a bar brawl and wondered what else Wylie had never told her about. They sat in silence for a while looking out towards the boat in the centre of the lake, until its sails

finally fluttered down and the sailor pulled a paddle from the bottom of the boat. Everything in sharp silhouette. The boat glided slowly towards shore.

"Maybe you're right, who knows," Wylie said, with a contempt that was not aimed at Del.

Something had felt askew to Del since they had returned from their failed adventure to the ocean. Everyone looked a little different, the fun seemed to have drained out of them all. Anton had become somewhat tiresome, with his feigned innocence and facile conclusions, but Wylie still seemed to find it all entertaining. Yet she felt wrong too, her responses seemed rehearsed. Del found herself constantly fighting against crankiness, and Pratt had nothing to say about anything, was even more aloof than usual.

Wylie and Del walked up the road one afternoon. They looked at the paved walkways and empty porches, the kids' bikes abandoned in the middle of the sidewalk.

"It's quiet around here," Wylie said, doing several turns in an attempt to locate people.

Del looked around. "It's Sunday morning, they're probably all in church."

Wylie stared at ground-floor windows, looking for signs of life. "You can't be serious," she said. A door banged shut just ahead of them and a middle-aged woman weary-looking and well-dressed made her way down the steps of a house. Wylie walked a little faster.

"Excuse me," the woman raised her hand towards Del and Wylie, "Do either of you know the time?" Neither of them did. She tapped her watch and twisted her mouth up into a sour look of annoyance.

"It's hard enough to stay afloat without this kind of thing," she said, turning away and sighing loudly. Door to door sales were obviously going badly. She walked ahead of them up the street, tilting against the weight of a bulky canvas bag, her heels clicking hard against the sidewalk all the way to her car.

It was just a flash, a thought glimpsed and gone, but for that fraction of a second Del saw Wylie in the woman leaning forward, her key in the car door lock. Wylie must have recognized something too, because they walked the rest of the way without another word between them.

Wylie and Pratt had disappeared for the evening. Once Del realized they wouldn't be back, she settled in with the newspaper, looking forward to an evening alone. But Anton showed up at the door, walked right in and declared that he had to speak with Pratt, the whole thing had become ridiculous. Del watched him march into the kitchen in search of Pratt.

"Where is he?" he said, walking back into the living room.

"Out with Wylie."

Anton sat down on the arm of the couch. "Shit," he said, and scratched his head sorrowfully.

It must have been six in the morning when Wylie shook Del awake. She opened her eyes to the sun angling straight in the

window and the silhouette of Wylie leaning over her, a figure cut out of light.

"I've broken up with Pratt," Wylie said, and when Del finally sat up and looked around she realized that Wylie was serious. All of their things, hers and Wylie's, were piled in the middle of the floor, some of it in bags some of it loose.

"Come on," Wylie said, throwing the sheet off Del, "we're going over to Anton's."

Anton was still asleep, but he often left his front door unlocked, so Wiley and Del were able to let themselves in quietly. They weren't sure what to do with their things, Anton would have been alarmed at the sight of all their half-packed clothes lying in the middle of his kitchen floor. So Del suggested the cellar, assuming Anton never went near it.

"No," Wylie said, "he sleeps down there sometimes."

From the way Anton talked, Del had assumed he was a little uncomfortable about going down into the cellar. "How do you know?" Del said.

Wylie shrugged. "Let's just pile it by the back door."

Wylie, Del and Anton were standing by the apricot tree, Anton demonstrating how the apricots had begun to ripen. He rolled one around in his fingers reverentially, pointing and talking then taking a bite. No one noticed Pratt enter the yard, and once he was in and had found his soccer ball abandoned in the grass by the gate, he took aim and drilled it at the back of Anton. Anton didn't

know it was coming, and when it hit him full-force between the shoulder blades he stumbled forward and fell to the ground.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shouted at Pratt once he'd figured out what had happened, but Pratt had already left the yard, leaving the gate open behind him.

Del coudn't get a straight answer out of anyone. Wylie oscillated between silent moodiness and a wild hilarity that had her giggling and slapping her belly at things Del didn't think were funny in the least. Anton just shook his head sorrowfully and said, "I don't know, I don't know."

The gap in the hedge seemed to develop a gravitational pull, of which everyone was constantly, uneasily aware. Concerted efforts were made to ignore it, but that only made its presence more pronounced. Anton stopped sitting under his apricot tree, planting himself instead at the front corner of his house in shadows. It was the only place in his yard where the gap in the hedge disappeared from view. He stated authoritatively that bugs had infested the tree and had been dropping on him all morning, volunteering the excuse when no one had asked for it.

"Much better here," he said shifting and wiggling in his folding chair, and Wylie and Del watched him until he stood up and began a full-out repositioning of the chair in the grass.

"Lumpy lawn," he said, his face turned away from them.

Old anecdotes were being recycled for the sake of conversation, and Wylie and Anton were trying hard not to notice. Wylie's laugh became shrill and affected, and Anton laughed hard along with her. Del's mood continued to sink. After a while she

felt inertia starting to settle in. When she stood up Wylie and Anton stopped talking and watched her apprehensively. She turned away and left without a word.

Pratt and Del ran into each other on the road, headed in opposite directions.

"Go for a swim?" Pratt said, nodding his head in the direction of the lake. He was in cut-offs, a yellow bath towel mottled with bleach spots hanging over his shoulder. Del looked past him, saw the heat hazing off the road, heard cicada shrieking from the ditch.

"I didn't know you swam," she said, and Pratt half-smiled.

"Once in a while."

He looked at Del for a moment, said, "Well," then began to walk on towards the lake.

"Hang on," Del said, "I don't have my towel," and she started walking towards him.

"You can use mine if you want," he said, and slowed, waiting for her to catch up.

The telephone was off the hook when Del got back and Wylie and Anton had disappeared. She checked all the rooms, made her way from the kitchen on up. She even checked the roof.

Packing wasn't difficult, she hadn't brought much with her in the first place. But separating her things from Wylie's, knowing Wylie's possessions intimately, was a difficult thing to do. With Wylie she had always felt the same unselfconsciousness she had felt

as a child amid family. Wylie would always be the same as family. But she was difficult, and it occured to Del, not for the first time, that the alliance that had developed between Wylie and Anton involved an underlying struggle that gave their friendship its exclusionary quality. Anton seemed both happy and miserable in Wylie's company, and Del was sure that Wylie had noticed.

Del gave up on the packing, but she didn't see anyone the rest of that day, making a point of staying away. When she finally made her way back to the house a little after midnight, opening the door cautiously, she couldn't bring herself to go upstairs. So she lay down on the couch and slept fitfully until dawn.

She gathered up her things in the early morning, but she only made it as far as Pratt's. She sat on his steps looking out at the neglected yard in early-morning shadows and the sun slowly rising. She liked this house better than Anton's, and she found herself longing to sink into the couch and read, the heavy wood furniture and long bare windows like allies flanking her.

Eventually Del knocked on the door. It took Pratt a while to answer, and when he finally did he acted annoyed that Del hadn't simply walked in and saved him the trouble. Del followed him through to the kitchen where breakfast was underway, everything carefully removed from the heat in advance of his answering the door.

"You've been sitting out there for half an hour," Pratt said, and Del felt a jolt, a momentary body shock. "Push down the toast, would you?" he said. He added eggs to the pan.

Del put her thumb on the lever and said, "I think I need to mow your lawn."

Pratt scrambled the eggs vigorously in the pan, flipping and turning them with a wooden spoon. "I like it long," he said.

Del put the toast on a plate and got the butter out of the fridge. She slipped a piece of egg from the pan with her fingers. "Too much salt."

Pratt tossed a couple more eggs in, put on more toast and sat down with Del to breakfast.

After breakfast the lawn got mowed. It was hard work, the mower had trouble getting through all the tall grass the first time over, so Del had to mow it twice. After that, they spruced up the garden together, dug up the weeds and cut back the hedge. Pratt hardly said a word.

"Your uncle's coming back," Del said without having been told, and Pratt nodded. He clipped a branch and she held out the garbage bag.

After that Pratt seemed to relax a little, telling jokes and whistling absently through his front teeth as they worked. He seemed relieved not to have to bear alone the weight of information.

They spent the night together talking, Pratt in the armchair and Del stretched out on the couch.

"Anton's porcupine is a hedgehog," Del said.

"Yeah, I know."

They were quiet for a few minutes after that, both looking off at nothing, and then Pratt said, as an afterthought that kept on being thought, "I didn't have the heart to tell him."

They talked all night. They talked about everything but Wylie, and somewhere before dawn Del drifted into sleep, lulled by the rhythm of Pratt's voice.

The morning made no sense. While Pratt showered and Del was making coffee in the kitchen, the front door flew open and Wylie entered the house screaming.

"Goddamn it, Del," she shouted, "what do you think you're doing?"

Del knocked a spoon off the counter then dropped the coffee filter twice before realizing that she was shaking. "Nothing," she said, "nothing at all. You and Anton were making me sick, so I came over to Pratt's."

"What do you think you're doing," Wylie kept shouting while Del, still shaking, poured out the coffee. Wylie shouted without waiting for an answer, over and over, as though she couldn't think of a better thing to say.

It was a funny thing to watch, horrifying too, four of the neighbours converging on Anton's house, the teenager's mother in the lead with her daughter in tow. She held the girl by the front of her tank top with such a firm hold that the girl kept grabbing alternately at her mother's clenched hand and the cloth of her shirt in a desperate attempt to keep her young breasts covered.

Anton was in shock. He blushed down to his neck at the accusations and couldn't find any words that made sense. The girl kept wimpering, "He didn't do anything, ma," and tugging pathetically at her shirt. Wylie gave Anton a fierce look and walked out of the yard, banging the gate violently behind her. Pratt was nervous about getting involved, since his uncle would be back soon and had to live in the town. The neighbours eyed him suspiciously from across the lawn but said nothing. Del didn't know what to make of any of it. She approached the mother cautiously, but before she'd said a word the mother screamed, "STAY OUT OF IT," at her, without even turning to look.

They had seen the girl out on the lake. She had swum out to where they still waited hopefully for a bite, on the second day, and she had circled their boat slowly. She chatted with them and treaded water, told them they should try different bait. They asked her if she wanted to give it a try, and she had pulled herself up easily into the boat. Like this, she had said, taking the fishing rod from Anton and snapping the line back quickly so that it soared above the water before landing.

After a bit of talk she had looked at Anton and asked, What would you do if you got a girl pregnant? Anton and Pratt said nothing and avoided looking at the girl. You know, hypothetically, she added. Still they said nothing. Finally she said, I can't tell my mom. She gripped the fishing rod and looked out at the line where it disappeared below the surface of the water. She said it calmly.

They had been sought out for council because they had no authority in the community. She had needed someone to talk to, and so a conversation about the possible scenarios ensued.

Anton had talked to the girl again after that. He had caught up with her on the road one day, and they had spent the afternoon swimming. And there was another time after that, where she appeared on the path behind Anton on one of his walks through the woods.

Wylie was upset. Del found her down by the lake, tears rolling down her cheeks though her face looked calm, as if she weren't even aware that she was crying. Del sat down beside her. She thought of how Wylie was strong and weak in strange ways.

"Poor Anton," Wylie kept saying, "poor, poor Anton."

Del had no idea, not really, of how Wylie actually felt about Anton. She might have been in love with him for all Del knew.

Wylie said, "Everyone has their own defense." She stared out at the lake, and for a moment she laughed bitterly.

The rift Wylie had created between Pratt and Anton was surely irreparable, but Del wasn't sure anymore if it was really her fault.

Wylie rested the weight of her chin in her hand. "And yet," she said, "when does that defence ever work against the thing you're most afraid of?"

Things were straightened out, though an apology was never offered, and three days later Anton packed up his car in silence while Wylie, Pratt and Del stood watching.

The churchbells rang out the noon hour. There was always a sequence, it couldn't be helped. There was the old man rising, struggling with all of his might. He had died a few months later in his sleep. Things happened that couldn't be undone. For a moment Del pictured Anton happy, dozing beneath the apricot tree that turned out to be nothing like an antidote at all.

He sank into the seat behind the wheel, sank like there was no reviving him. He backed out of the driveway carefully, his arm across the back of the passenger seat and his whole body half-turned, looking out the back window to see where he was headed.

TRITON AND TEX

Artie was saying, "Give me the keys, give me the keys," when Helen saw that the door was already standing wide open. She was thinking What for? but knew that he wanted to lock the house against further intrusion. It made no sense, the place had already been stripped, but she understood the shaky feeling, the need to cover up. A train blasted its whistle at the intersection half a mile down the road. "Fucking christ," Artie said, and Helen thought Yes, yes, nothing to do but go. Then she saw that it was aimed at her. After a moment she dug into her pockets. Her fingers touched cold metal. She pulled out the keys and handed them to Artie. He stood framed in the doorway looking inward with the keys in his hand. Helen noted that the back of his jacket had a streak of bird shit on it, and that his hair had begun to thin a little on top. She looked at the keys in his hand, looked at the door standing open. The house had been transformed before her eyes into a hostile entity. The train roared past. "Unlucky," Artie said, and stepped into the house.

Helen turned to watch the train pass on the opposite side of the road. The names offered no indication of points of origin. The cars used to have Alberta Wheat or BC Lumber painted on them,

giving her a feeling of size, the tracks stretching out west, all the way across the country. But Helen hadn't seen those trains lately. Only these unidentifiable ones, that gave her the feeling that she had been left behind. She wondered where this train was going, aware of the sound of Artie's boots clumping from room to room upstairs. The last car disappeared down the track and a moment later Artie's footsteps stopped. She heard him say, "Who am I talking to?" then continue to check each room, taking account of what they had lost.

Making tea became difficult for Helen, who was used to plugging in the kettle then sitting in her old rocking chair by the porch door to wait. Hemmed in by the refrigerator on one side and the wall on the other, doing nothing in anticipation of a certainty gave her a strange pleasure. The waiting was calming, helped her over the hump of 4 pm. But the chair had been stolen, and she found herself pacing the house, critical. The furniture was decrepit, the lampshades yellowed. The kitchen got the afternoon sun, but that only made things worse. The table and chairs, the bottled spices over the stove, the cupboards full of food. Each remained poised and still, and kept its distance. Even the glasses and mugs and plates, all empty, clean and waiting. Everything threatened. Out back the yard was winter-ravaged, with mounds of shrinking snow and moldy leaves and a garden that was empty. There was the shriek of a crow. It flew into view, dropped down towards the dead grass then climbed again into the air without appearing to lose speed. The crows were so much bigger than they had been in her youth, they

unsettled her whenever she saw them up close, perched aggressively on the edge of public trash cans, leaning in and ripping at discarded paper plates and crumpled chip bags. There was a ferocity to them, they were scavengers who had swelled in physical size on the satisfaction of abandoned picnics.

Helen was cold; she shivered. She headed back into the kitchen to check on the kettle and found, as she often did these days, that she had forgotten to plug it in.

The sun hit the floorboards, drew a line up to the door. Helen awoke to the sound of a train passing. The carpet had had to be taken up, and she lay stretched out in a chair by the window. The living room felt empty, even though only the carpet and the television were missing. Artie was still upset about the TV going.

"What do you expect?" Helen had said standing in the bedroom doorway one evening. She looked at Artie lying on top of the covers flipping the tongue of his belt back and forth.

"But Christ, why the television," he said. "Couldn't they have broken in last month?" In the time since the robbery the conversations between them had felt like acting to Helen. There had been so many rehearsals that the words meant nothing.

"It was one of the few valuable things in the place," Helen said, thinking of her computer and all her work lost, "of course they were going to take it." Artie looked annoyed but said nothing. He had given away his small black and white when he'd bought the new one, and was suffering now from withdrawal. Helen stopped

looking at Artie and focused on the black pane in the window beyond him. A moment later the house began to shiver.

"Train," Helen said quietly, and they both listened in silence until it had passed and the house was still again.

"I'm going over to Tom and what's-her-name's." Artie swung off the bed and tucked in his shirt.

"Katia," Helen offered.

"Yeah," Artie said and galloped down the stairs.

Helen stretched out in the chair and sat up, the sunlight spreading across her lap like a quilt. Her house had been broken into, someone had stepped uninvited into a corner of her life and made off with her belief in escape, the sense that she could, should be able to, step into an enclosed space and have others respect the door shut behind her. She must have been dreaming it. No one owes me anything, she thought. People are built to be selfish. The thought of Artie squeezed itself around her like a jacket that was too tight in the shoulders.

She was still in the chair by the window, trying to get some reading done, and it floated by like a bird, or an empty bag on the breeze. A man with a white baseball cap passed against a backdrop of skeletal trees and empty track, flowing by on his bicycle, the white cap pointing forward. He was in his sixties and appeared to be doing laps, riding up to the end of the street where it turned into sloppy dirt road, turning around then heading back past the window. He dawdled along, the slow arc of the pedal moving him forward. His jeans were frayed at the bottoms and spotted with old

paint, and his big green gloves rested awkwardly on the handle bars of his girlish bike. It was too small and painted mauve. After a while Helen couldn't help watching when he passed, would lift her tea and sip, follow him the length of the pane. Then she would wait, looking out the side window at the pale green clapboard house, the stretch of ground leading up to it, sparse with trees and covered in rotted leaves. She was pretty sure the house was his, and she had noticed many times the name on the mailbox by the road: Glasskatt. He would pass again, and she would anticipate how long before his next appearance. The book lay open in her lap. After a while it was like carrying on a conversation.

Then there were sirens, the sound of firetrucks racing along the main road towards her and the man on the bike. He pedalled past the window right on time and the sirens got closer. A minute later the sirens had disappeared, had fled right past, but he didn't ride by. Helen looked at the clock. She looked out at the empty road.

After a few minutes she gave up on him and turned back to her book, but found that she had lost her place. She looked out the front window at the trees and the bland, brown hill behind them, she looked out the side at the clapboard house. Must have followed the sirens, she thought, and felt that she had been stood up.

She saw him go past the window a few days later, on foot this time and pushing a baby carriage. He was wearing the same cap, and the same gloves gripped the bar of the carriage. She wandered outside and sat on the step, waiting for him to pass again.

He approached her in time with the train.

"There goes the Triton and Tex," he said, gazing at the train and nodding his head in response to his own statement. "It takes a little of me with it every time it passes." He watched it rattle along, car by car along the tracks. Helen noted that there was no baby in the carriage.

"Oh, just practicing," he said, but he sounded noncommital. After a moment he added, "I'm taking up babysitting." His eyes were on the train. He scratched the side of his nose with a big gloved fist then as an afterthought said, "I'm Al. Live just up the road there." Helen smiled at him briefly then returned to the names on the sides of the boxcars. Triton went past on a dozen or so cars that were interspersed with cars marked Tex. Two others said Eco Mines. "It gives you something then takes it away," Al said, meaning the train. Helen listened to him speak against the clang and squeal of the wheels. Then he smiled and waved his hand in front of him as though to dismiss the entire conversation.

There was never really a silence at night. Even with Artie away ("Too drunk," he'd said, "staying over," then hung up) the house made night noises of its own. The wall opposite would creak, a moment later a different one. The hot water heater would start up then die away after a few minutes, the electric heaters click click clicked, keeping the temperature even. Even the refrigerator was audible from the bed. Helen kept the lights off and listened.

Cars fled down the highway at 2:14 in the morning. The sound of them approaching, passing, then disappearing, covered the distance of road and trees. A rise and fall of sound. Helen hadn't

noticed before. But she had hoisted the window wide open so that the cool April air would spill across her arms, her neck, her face, like hands brushing against her. She thought of driving into Montreal, right then, of spending the last few hours of the night wandering along empty streets lit up with the feel of temporary abandonment, of a pause sustained. She loved the middle of the night in the city. But Artie had the car, and she was stuck, stuck alone out in the Eastern Townships. Her breathing steadied. She fell asleep to the sound of a car passing on the highway, the sound of tires on asphalt and the displacement of air by two thousand pounds and a person she would never meet.

There were things that Helen brought with her from the city that had been impossible to leave behind. She couldn't shake off the tiny plot gardens: ground-floor apartment dwellers had turned and raked the few feet of earth available and filled them with flowers and vegetable greens. She had at first thought that the countryside dwarfed the cramped beauty of the city, but slowly this sense had started to reverse itself, until she sat staring out at the glib trees and found herself thinking hungrily of her old street overflowing with considered blooms.

Another thing she hauled like cheap luggage out to the countryside with her was a peculiar vision of Artie as the final test of her ability to share with another her space, her particular take on the world, her pleasure and bitter cynicism. The final attempt. Her patience had worn thin. That's how she had felt in the first euphoric months of their relationship, had felt pretty sure

that it was possible with Artie. And although she had slowly begun over the following year and a half to consider this view suspect, she clung to it just the same, it was easier that way.

Helen never bothered making the bed; Artie didn't, so why should she. But somewhere along the way he had started to reproach her for things like this. It was a silent reproach, a look, or a frown; a circuitous path around the symptoms of his contempt. "Hypocrite," Helen said whenever she caught him at it, but he feigned confusion, said he'd been misunderstood. They were locked to each other by the silence of the woods.

Helen started wondering, grew impatient. She was curious to know how Al spent his days.

"He's probably just a senile old guy," Artie said over dinner. He spoke distractedly.

"I don't think so. But he's got motives." Helen wished she hadn't brought it up. Artie took everything as an argument these days.

"Motives?" Artie said this with exaggerated emphasis, and his eyebrows pinched together mockingly. He rolled green pebble peas into a cliff of mashed potatoes with his fork.

"Never mind," Helen said. The house felt too small. She got up from the table giddy and panicked and wanting to get away from Artie. The stairs passed under her feet two at a time. Her heart was racing. She didn't quite mean "motives", but the word acted as shorthand in her head for the machinations of a mind. She meant that there was a thing that he was working at, whereas she and

Artie were working at nothing. She locked the door of the bathroom behind her.

Sleep had not come. It wasn't Artie's snoring that kept her awake, even though she had been able to hear it from time to time through the wall during the night. He had taken to falling asleep on the couch over the past few weeks, and when his back would no longer put up with that, he took to the spare room. When he slept in the spare room he was always careful to let Helen go to bed first.

Helen had been unable to sleep because every time she began to doze off, when she felt the relaxing of muscles and the tension lifting off her, she would get the distinct feeling that Artie was standing above her, talking gently though she couldn't make out the words, and pulling the blankets around her tighter and tighter until she felt that she would suffocate. And then the quiet image would come to her, clear as day, of the yellow handle-end of the axe tilting lightly into the wall, leaning by the back door, and she would sit up wide awake with her heart racing.

The night took forever to end. She only left the bed when the sky reversed itself, went from black to midnight blue to sapphire, then the light seeped into it full and the sun began to rise. She sat at the kitchen table and stared at the floor, waiting for the kettle to boil. She wasn't thinking about anything now. She gazed down at the linoleum and saw the air waver above it like a mirage, like heat rising. Channels of air flowed across one another,

frenetic and unstoppable. It seemed like a sort of madness. She could see the air, and it moved too quickly.

The window ledge was flaking and bits of old paint stuck to Helen's arms. She peered through the window, just to see what it was like inside the clapboard house. Al Glaskatt was out again with the baby carriage, and Helen had concluded that he lived alone. The living room was immaculate, with the cushions just so and a newspaper carefully refolded at the edge of the coffee table. She spotted a rocking chair pushed up against the far wall. Her rocking chair. She left the window and walked back across the grass.

Making her way through the spring stench of wet rotting leaves and earth, Helen noted how things emerged, settled into relief, then wore away until they disappeared altogether. Millions of years, or a single season. She had found the rocking chair abandoned in an alley in Mile End the spring before, when she and Artie had just begun talking about moving out to the country and renting a house.

"Why, I found it in the garbage," Al said standing in his doorway, "up there by the main road." He smiled at her sympathetically and pointed up the only road. They both followed the invisible line leading away from his finger. Helen thought, Here is my tiny spot on the planet, and I'm sharing it with this stranger who has stolen my rocking chair out of the garbage. A minute passed while they both looked out at the road, then Al stepped aside and opened the door wider.

"Come on," he said and tugged gently at her arm until she stepped into his house.

"Can you *steal* something out of the garbage?" Artie said. He was leaning over the sink eating a sandwich. "I mean it's in the garbage, it's been discarded. You've given up ownership. Right?" A piece of tomato fell to the floor as he turned to address Helen. His questions were clearly rhetorical.

"That's my chair, Artie, and I didn't give up ownership of it just because someone else tossed it in the garbage. It was stolen." She was sitting on the kitchen table, absently playing with a spoon. She looked down at herself distorted in the spoon, then at the mess of tomato and mayonnaise on the floor. The spoon slipped through her fingers and clanged against the linoleum.

"In principle," Artie said, shoving the last of his sandwich into his mouth. "How's anyone supposed to know it was stolen? You've garbage-picked hundreds of times." He was right, she had dug gleefully through other people's trash many times.

"That's not the point," she said, retrieving the spoon. But there was no resolve in her voice.

Once she was inside Al's house Helen stopped caring about the chair. He gave her tea and put on opera. "You'll like this," he said, and when she looked at him leaning over the record player he was smiling.

Since the weather had turned nice, the days warm and bright and the nights cool and damp, Helen had taken to sitting out on the porch after dark. She was listening, trying very hard to hear. The high cry of the frogs, calling out for mates when the air began to cool, made it difficult for her to be sure of what she was listening for. So she sat for long spells, breathing in wet cedar and pine and listening to the thrum of frogs, singling out one here and there from the others and gauging its distance. When she singled them out, she inevitably had a moment of confusion, and the sound became an amplified crying out of young birds. There would be a slight seizing of her stomach, as though she had walked straight into the blunt end of the banister, and she would feel the backs of her eyes begin to throb. But then she would remember that it was frogs, only frogs. So loud, she thought looking out into the dark. Yet she found it soothing.

Once while she sat out on the porch she heard the click of the door, the rasp across the mat. Artie stood still for a moment, listening. "So loud," he said from behind her. She nodded, without turning around. "Coming in soon?" he asked, his voice quiet against all the calling and answering, and she nodded again, and again her stomach seized slightly, a pain right at the centre. She rose slowly from the chair, and that night she slept with Artie again.

After that she found herself listening for the click of the door, but it didn't come, there was only that once. After a while she stopped sitting out on the porch after dark.

Al had sat her down and suggested tea. He had made her choose: regular or herbal. She thought herbal would be nice. Mint, chamomile, fennel. Or senna leaves. But that's a laxative, he'd said and laughed, we won't give you that. Helen couldn't remember what she had chosen. She vaguely suspected that she had not chosen at all. The house was so tidy, everything folded and placed, edges straight and corners perfectly square. His mother had made the pillows, needlepoint orchids that looked like wasps poised to sting. The pictures on the walls were painted by him. She couldn't decide whether they were good or bad. They were swamped in red she remembered, but thinking about it now, she couldn't recall what they had been of. She had only the sense of their placement on the walls, how, from where she had been sitting, with the window to her left letting in light, they had been outlined by their own asymmetrical shadows.

There were things she remembered, new images in her mind, that came out of that afternoon at Al's. When she tried to think of them, they would not come. She could only remember that there were things he had told her that she hadn't known before. But they came in flashes, jumped out at her when she wasn't looking for them. While she watered her African violets she found herself thinking about the soapstone that could easily be found in deposits all through the mountain, and how it didn't occur naturally in the geological landscape of the area but had been carried down by glaciers long ago. She had never thought of stone as being anything other than permanent, the most solid of things. She had been wrong, it seemed. While she pinched the dead flowers off the plants she

saw the room again, saw the bottom of his stairs curving out of sight around the corner and the empty hurricane lamps sitting at either end of the mantle like blind sentries. You have no children, Al had said from the kitchen, and she had been leaning against one of the orchid cushions that kept flipping back and forth between orchid and wasp. She remembered feeling uncomfortable just then. But then he came back in with a flowery china cup in each hand, each delicate and steaming, and said, Me neither, and she stopped noticing the wasps and felt better.

What happens when you stop liking the look of your lover? Artie's face had grown sallow, perhaps it had always been, but Helen couldn't take her eyes off the shadows and hollows of his cheeks, the bluntness of his undiscriminating nose. All of his features were suddenly too prominent, bigger than she could take, a familiar image in a warped mirror.

She took to hunting after Artie left for work in the mornings, a timid search through other people's solitude. She looked in windows, trying to be discreet; she told herself she was searching for her things and was not interested in the people who inhabited the houses. People were asleep on their couches in the middle of the day, or sitting up and staring out at nothing. She had had no idea.

"A lot of people live alone around here," Al said when she told him what she had seen. "Most are older, don't know what to do with themselves." Helen imagined them as she had seen them,

isolated in their separate homes. She thought they would have banded together, set up a bingo night or afternoon bridge.

Al told her that they had nothing to do and Helen detected a bitterness in his voice. "What a thing to do to yourself." He turned to his large bookshelf to continue the search she had interrupted, and Helen thought, Yes, what a thing.

She didn't really care about the furniture. With Artie, though, she felt she had to keep up appearances. He was always talking about consistency. Though it wasn't entirely an act; the furniture seemed to matter more in his company.

He spent most of his evenings over at Tom and Katia's these days, watching television or playing bridge.

"Who's the fourth?" Helen asked.

"What?" Artie said with his mouth full of toothpaste. Helen watched him fiddle with the taps, toothpaste frothing down his chin while he tried to get the temperature just right. He spat in the sink. "Just some friend of Tom's," he said and put his mouth up to the tap to rinse. Helen thought he responded to her question as though it were an attack. She wrapped her arms around him from behind, she hadn't meant it that way. "He's fucking awful," Artie said more boldly, leaning forward to spit. But then he paused. "Do you mind? I can't move." He looked at her in the mirror, his toothbrush poised above the sink. Helen removed her arms from his waist and left the room.

How do people manage, Helen wondered while she swept the broken glass up off the kitchen floor. The glass of water had slipped from her hand for no reason at all. She felt dazed, realized she was far too tired, out of all proportion with her level of activity. She had taken to doing nothing. Some people can live their lives, she thought, and other people can't. She hadn't managed to get her work done, had had to call up the people and tell them about the robbery. She thought she had made it sound worse than it was. There's nothing wrong, she thought. Just a little tired. But she had taken on no new projects. Her days slipped past her, disappeared like highway under a car speeding along into the night.

Helen dropped in on Al, asked him how the babysitting was going, even though she didn't believe in it. The carriage, she had noticed, was often filled with rocks collected off the mountain. She hoped he would invite her in again for tea, play music and tell her with enthusiasm to listen, just listen, as he had done before, but she caught him on his way out.

"Did I tell you that? I don't think I told you that." He was standing on his front porch, not looking at Helen but pulling things out of his pockets, turning crumpled pieces of paper over in vague examination then returning them to a different pocket. She told him what he had said.

"Oh no no," he said, "I told you the wrong thing." He continued shuffling things from pocket to pocket. "Rocks," he said and smiled. But then his smile disappeared and he said, "That

fellow you live with," and stopped. Helen wondered what exchange they had had, what Artie must have said. She should have asked, but she couldn't. She felt she was expected to know already. "He hasn't much tact, has he," Al said, but Helen just stared and said nothing. She didn't like being held responsible for Artie's behaviour, she knew perfectly well how he could be. There was no setting things straight.

Al waited, but she looked so bewildered that he changed the subject back to rocks.

Everything bugged her. The way he held his fork, the sound of him blowing his nose. The obvious energy he gave to slamming the door behind him whenever he entered or left the house. Actions that felt like recriminations, for something she had failed to do.

Artie had refused to buy a new television on the grounds that television stole one's initiative. He was kneeling in front of the bookshelf in the living room when he'd said it, pulling books halfway out then pushing them back, hardly looking at what was written on them yet examining the whole of it as though he had never been that close before. As soon as he'd said it he started to squirm. "You know what I mean." Then he set about shrugging his shoulders in his own defense, as though he were simply repeating something that Helen had said first. Artie never said things like that, he didn't give a damn about initiative, and Helen knew that the source of his discomfort was not having found his own words for it before fumbling it on to Helen.

"Who," Helen asked, "did you pick that up from?" Even before it came out she knew that it was the wrong thing to say. All the wind went out of her then. Artie, who read newspapers and magazines and rarely looked between the covers of a book, said nothing. "Artie," Helen began. But there was nothing else to say. She turned and walked out of the house, banging the front door shut behind her.

The drive out to the farm where Helen had spent her childhood summers took her only twenty minutes. She knew it was there, had chosen to move out to the area for that reason, but she hadn't been back to see it since the previous summer, just a few weeks before they had left the city for good. No one had lived there for years and it had begun to fall apart, but she liked to come and see it every once in a while. There had been a milk cow she and her brothers had named Augusta, and chickens that laid their eggs in the bucket of the rusting tractor behind the small barn; the fort they'd built in the woods; the dinners cooked on a hibachi on the front lawn while their parents sat away from the smoke, drinking Manhattans with friends who had come up for the weekend. Visiting the farm gave her a feeling of expansiveness, gave an immediacy to her past that was rarely there, in the same way that catching the scent of spring lilac made her feel strangely whole, because it took her back to her grandmother's garden. It was like reclaiming a piece of an earlier time, a clipping that she could place on the window sill in a glass jar with water and look at, without feeling the need to hurry.

She parked on the shoulder of the road. What had once been a dirt road leading up to the house had narrowed into an overgrown path. The bullrushes had taken over on either side where it had always been swampy and stood now brittle and yellow, like petrified wheat. Long, bedraggled grass pointed up the wet path. When Helen reached the crest of the small rise in the road she stopped. The house stood before her, the barn off to the left. Both were weather-worn and sagging. The white pine, that for so many years she had watched grow tall and lush and whose soft, draping needles she had run her fingers through just the year before, had been snapped in two by lightning. The upper half lay sprawled out on the damp ground with the broken trunk caught in the lower branches of the tree. Helen looked at the empty house, the barn, the dying tree. She noted the sunshine pouring down, and the hint of green coming up from the earth all around. Not a single cloud in the sky above.

Helen began to cry. She cried so hard that when she walked towards the toppled tree she stumbled over a rock. She wrapped herself in the tree's branches and stroked the long, soft needles, again and again, pressed her face against the delicate needles.

Helen was sitting out on the porch in the early evening, the telephone resting on her shoulder. Artie's mother was telling her about the state of her house, how the subfloor had rotted through and leaks had led the rain down the kitchen wall; the carpet would have to be pulled back and the floor ripped out from the inside. Helen was picturing the dark kitchen, the hot water tank in the

corner streaked with grease that had accumulated over the years. She saw the ugly paintings that hung on the living room walls, the old trophies and dingy paperbacks.

The light suddenly changed. Helen looked up. The sky was turning orange and red, there were thick puffs of white cloud like crumpled paper, like notes to herself unheeded, and a silver flicker moving across the sky. She watched the tiny distant plane glide silently across the clouds, stopped seeing the house in the suburbs, watched the lovely light and smelled the air.

"Artie's not here, I'm afraid," she suddenly said to Artie's mother. And then, "A car's just pulled up, I'll have to talk to you later." She pictured a car as she said it. She hung up. The car disappeared. She looked back up at the sky, at the thin white streamer left by the plane.

She had had enough of watching trains pass. Artie hadn't been home in three days, hadn't even called, so she left no note, packed a bag and walked up to the road where she put out her thumb and was picked up almost right away. They beat the train, racing over the railroad crossing ahead of it, and sped on towards Montreal in an old convertible with the top down. This made conversation impossible, which was a relief.

"My mother," Al had said two days before, standing at Helen's door. He had pulled in his bottom lip when he spoke.

It took some time to sort out the confusion of names, because when Helen asked the people at the funeral parlour which chapel was

reserved for Al's mother's service, everyone told her that she was in the wrong place. She gave the name again, but they continued to shake their heads politely. When she spotted Al across the room speaking with an elderly woman she pointed him out, but the employees of the funeral parlour only shook their heads a little less politely and said that she was mistaken. So when Al said to Helen, It's sweet of you to have come, she couldn't resist the impropriety of asking him directly who owned the house he was living in. "A fellow named Glaskatt," he said without appearing offended, only slightly disoriented by death. All questions were equal.

People sat hip to hip in the pews. The chapel was full. Helen stood at the back and so had a good view of all the bald spots and elderly redheads with their roots coming in grey. The minister got up and kept repeating how because there was an all-knowing God there was meaning and purpose to life. God was the architect of all things. Helen was getting irritated. She kept imagining herself leaping up so that all the bald spots and grey roots would turn and suddenly reveal faces dismayed, saw herself standing at the back and declaring that there was no such thing. And no purpose, she would add, and no meaning. She withered, said nothing. She tried not to listen to the careful way in which the minister spoke the dead woman's name, having only recently learned it and so holding it up like a hollowed-out egg before people who had known it for years. Helen noted the plaid skirts, the floral dresses, the pot bellies in dress shirts, belonging to old people mostly, with faces like cracked leaves, who were there to pay their respects.

Back then to the daughter's house, Al's sister, where the dead woman's aging son-in-law was bellowing gently at everyone to get out of the kitchen, get out of the narrow hallway, why do people stand in the most insincere places? Nobody asked him what he meant. But they continued to clog up the hallway, dawdling over goodbyes and making it difficult for anyone trying to slip off unnoticed to the washroom at the other end of the house.

After it was over Helen wandered the city, and that's where she saw him, saw Artie sitting at an outdoor cafe at an intimate table with a woman she had never seen. The context was so strange, the sight so unfamiliar and the city so new again, that she felt no shock, only relief.

It was already May, a hot afternoon, but only May. Helen thought how the summers seemed unending and yet somehow did not last very long. There was the muddled sense, as she walked on towards the park, that in the summer months she was really asleep, going through the motions of wakefulness; that it was during the winters that she was actually awake. There was the smell of lilac, and something else whose name she couldn't think of. She passed a small patch of garden where a woman stood against a fence. The woman frowned. She was in a sleeveless shirt with her hair bunched up on top of her head in an elastic band. Her arms were crossed and she was smoking a cigarette. She was looking, alternately, far up the street and through the open doorway of her house. The brightness of the sun, the cars glinting past in a flash of repose, the clicking of bicycles changing gears while two people laughed on

the sidewalk up ahead. Vague images, all of it, as though in a dream. The light never seemed to end. Turning on a lamp in the corner of a room was, on days like this, no more than an exercise, like doing scales on an untuned piano. The colour of the narrow lawns had deepened in only a few days.

In the park, the stone monument to something or other, she didn't know what, was engraved in shadows with the creep of moss at its base. Feeling as though she were asleep even right then she wondered at the time it took (which felt like nothing and yet was interminable) to walk to the bench on the far side of the empty pond. Women wearing hats with the brims flipped up at the front sat with books in their laps, a foot each on the lower rung of a baby stroller. Trucks were assembled at the centre of the pond. A chipped bronze statue of two cherubs swung gently from ropes and a hoist, as though pulled from the flames of a burning church. It was being carefully lowered into place at the centre of the asphalt pond where it would soon spew water from an empty urn. Then there was the creak of plastic wheels as a mother rose, slipped her book amid hot blankets then veered around the pond and disappeared.

Helen couldn't think; her brain would not go. Back in the city for the first time in nearly a year, and she could not think. The details of the winter would not come back to her. Yet there was a certain seduction to the slow flow of thought, the thick honey flow, she was content just to be in the park in the bright, bright sun. After an hour, though, of watching people move about, arrive in the park and leave, she felt she had fallen behind, as though

the city had grown strange in her absence, as though its language had evolved, and she had not kept up.

But then she rose and began to walk, left the park behind her. A firetruck rolled lazily up the street beside her. The young driver, with cropped hair, white t-shirt and firefighter suspenders, rested an elbow out the open window. He watched Helen walking along the street, and when he caught her eye he retrieved the cigarette from behind his ear, slipped it between his lips and smiled. Helen walked on.

DIVING

She moves through the varying temperatures of the water and it feels as if the layers of the water coincide with the layers of rocky sediment concealed within the earth, charting the progress of the world. Ellie can't see the sky from down here, but the sun that hovers above Turkey is pushing its way into the ocean, trying hopelessly to dig itself down into the corners. She'd like to wrap the ocean around her and dive deeper, but she knows the sun won't follow.

She can't see the sky, but she wonders if it's anything to look at anyway. Her eyes follow the line of a submerged cliff down and down until her eyes blur it over into darkness, and there's a question she wants to ask, but then she catches sight of Ruth trying to pull a starfish from between two rocks. Vivien is beside her, fussing with her mouthpiece and shifting her tank, and Ellie can hardly tell the two of them apart, their faces are transformed beyond recognition by masks and mouth pieces. She only knows Vivien by the fear she's showing, and Ruth by its absence.

My family's got religion, and it sounded like a disease the way Hamish said it. He's got a cactus that he keeps on his desk,

and he says he likes it best because it never seems to cower and wither, the way others inevitably do. I've felt, many times, its dry, prickly resistance, and wondered how it managed to survive. It's so hard, Hamish said sitting alone with me in his empty apartment, to kill.

Vivien and Ruth head for the surface, and Ellie reluctantly follows. She pauses to watch the other two for a moment, tracking the paths of their bodies slowly undulating through the water above her, Ruth's with ease, Vivien's a little awkwardly. It's hard to imagine confusing the two of them, who out of the water are nothing alike: beautiful Ruth with her long legs, and palid Vivien, who always looks a little desperate. Before Ellie begins her ascent she looks again to the dark that wavers beneath her.

The market here is a labyrinth of produce, cloth, livestock and people, of noise and dust and morning heat. Vivien, Ellie and Ruth, on their first day, waded through the rancid air and bloodied patches of dirt, through the shouting and beckoning of sellers trying to draw them near.

"It isn't right," Ruth said, "I don't feel right."

"Well," Vivien said, "but we're giving them our business."

"Travel forces you to suspend," Ellie said, "certain aspects of your principles." And the three of them argued their way through the tumult of the market.

At irregular intervals I come back to the question, but what are my principles? And what are yours, I silently ask Ruth and Vivien. Ruth tries to mold the moment around her core, to shape the day to her step. But for Vivien the moment, the now, and the now, is but a reminder of what is to come, and all that's been left behind.

They bought fruit from the market that day, mounds of it that cost them almost nothing, and they've been gorging every day on over-ripe tomatoes and rotting oranges because they have nowhere cool to store them, and it would be a sin to waste, Ruth says. And it's Ruth who wakes up burping tomato each morning, and for days now they've all had raw, acid mouths that sting when they laugh.

Soon Vivien will return to her job in Wales, while Ellie and Ruth continue travelling east into the sun. Every moment here Vivien feels time backing up. "It's backing up," she says with anguish, but Ellie disagrees. Time, Ellie says, is stuck in a sand pit with its wheels spinning, and she'd like to abandon it there and find her own way. Ruth feels acutely its ebb and flow, she says, and she tries not to look at the bits of metal and slime it throws up at her feet.

Vivien won't accept either of these because for her time is backing up, and what she's really looking for is confirmation that this is so. "Soon I'll be back," she mutters, "soon."

One of the men who has taken them out diving speaks English, and on the way back in his motor boat he praises his country in florid language that seems a little cockeyed coming from his mouth. He appears to hold a personal grudge against all other countries, "But not Canada of course," he adds. He smiles frighteningly at Ruth as he says for the third time, "Very beautiful." Aimed always, and always, at Ruth.

Two men in green berets with rifles slung over their shoulders are strolling along the docks, stopping occasionally to talk and smoke with the fishermen. The women climb from the motor boat and make their way along the dock, past the men idling in the heat.

Certain things remain, and can't be unlearned. There is a blinding flash of sunlight off metal as one of the soldiers turns to watch Ruth pass. Certain things, like the meaning of a look. Ruth turns her face away and walks a little faster. The moment is too quick, it can't be slipped past to the calm that flickers regeneratively in the distance.

Ellie and Ruth and Vivien walk up to the road, where the light angles down a little differently now than it first did this morning.

"The sun has shifted," Ellie announces as she watches shadows slanting out from people and objects, and Vivien and Ruth nod sagely. Things seem a little transformed.

"Yes," Vivien says, "it has, you're right," though no one could say in which direction. They kick up dust as they walk along the shoulder of the road, passing silent faces that have grown gradually recognizable. And still the three women are watched, veiled as they are in a haze of dust, by these silent faces with whom they will never speak. The women move past the faces and through the silence.

They walk towards staggered hills of faded green, where the brittle earth slopes down to touch the ocean, and shrunken cliffs erode imperceptibly. They have heard that there are shallow caves in those hills, intricately built into the sides of cliffs. One of these caves has an entrance of stone pillars surrounded by beautifully carved slabs, where a certain leader of a certain tribe is said to have lived centuries ago, when his people were under attack. They safely escaped to the hills, and lived out of reach in these caves dug precariously out of sheets of vertical rock.

The three of them survey the hills as they walk side by side along the road, taking special note of the cliffs. "Let's climb into the hills tomorrow," Ruth says. "I want to see the caves."

I'm not safe in the grip of a breeze. At times, when I have the strength, I fight my craving for the water, because I've begun to suspect the dangers. But it feels like only the weight of the ocean can keep me from flying apart.

They walk on, towards the dusty hills, but they stop long before they reach them, at a cafe where they sit at an outside table and order lunch.

The coffee here coats your tongue like a layer of silt, Ellie thinks, and she watches Vivien feeling it in her mouth and trying to rinse it away with gulps of bottled water. Between gulps, Vivien is trying to tell Ellie and Ruth how the earth is like a ball swinging above your head on an elastic string that's gradually being pulled into the sun because big objects attract smaller ones, and that includes planets and suns, that's what black holes are all about, and it's all going to go supernova one day. Somehow she has managed to slip into lightning and the build-up of positive ions and negative earth, and how lightning makes a double circuit to the ground though our eyes only catch one, without either Ruth or Ellie having noticed the transition. These things frequently just come out of Vivien, and right now she can't seem to settle on which details and connections are foggy because they simply aren't known, and which are gaps in her own knowledge. As a result, she is continually back-tracking in an effort to make it all clear.

Vivien is occupying herself in this way while Ruth is reading an English newspaper left behind by other foreigners and laughing out loud every few minutes at things she has read to herself. It looks unlikely that the words themselves are funny, with the paper open to the International News section, but Ruth is adept at reading her own meaning into things.

Ellie is watching them both and wishing they'd hurry up with their food so she can get back to the water. She leans her arms

forward onto the table, and it shifts abruptly beneath her weight. Coffee cups and dishes jump and clatter together, and Ruth and Vivien both look a little startled, though they say nothing. The clatter of dishes sounds odd to Ellie, without four walls to contain it. The tables all around them are empty, and Ellie looks through the window and into the building, but sees only a dark well of space. There are no screens in the windows here, she realizes, as though it's an important discovery she is making, and Vivien and Ruth both look at her, letting her know she has just said this out loud. "Did you notice?" she asks, and they both say yes, and go on with what they were doing.

Hamish existed in the mountains of his own mind, and when I touched him he'd drop down into the valleys, turn to water and wait. Hamish, I know, could wait forever, because he believes only in the bits of earth that keep his plant alive, and in the particles that arrange and rearrange themselves in the daylight when he's not looking.

Hamish had a theory once. When we die, he said, we go to another planet to live out our next life, which is really just a continuation of the first one, though everything is completely different. We're probably translucent crustaceans on one planet, and something altogether different on another, with thought and perception inconceivably different from what we know. The idea is that we spend eternity planet-hopping, and the reason no one here has any memory of a former life is that this one's the first, which also explains, he said, why people are so fucked. This life's like

the early stages of childhood, and we don't know anything, he said, nothing at all. But somewhere along the way this idea got abandoned, and that was the last of his theories as far as I knew.

But I recall that big objects attract smaller ones, and that includes planets and suns.

On their way back past the docks, Vivien stops to say hello to one of the men who took them out on the dive. Ruth has bouts of conspiratorial need, and today it's aimed against Vivien.

"Why," Ruth says, "doesn't she just tell him she wants to fuck him, she's sure as hell making it obvious enough." But Ellie won't go along with it, she's been feeling quiet and uncommunicative all morning, and just now, a bit naked out of the water.

"You've got a mouth, Ruth," Vivien says overhearing her. Ruth looks at Ellie but sees that she'll be of no use to her today, and so allows herself to be drawn into the gesturing between Vivien and the Turkish man by something she hears Vivien say.

"What does Vivien see," Ruth said to me when we first started travelling together, "what alarms her so?" And I think of this question now. The water is just the water to Vivien, the sky just the sky, and she seems to cling for safety to the fact of them. Vivien is like some sort of fish swimming up-stream. But the current is too strong for her, she's constantly slapped back down. And now she is struggling to keep her place in the shallows by the bank, among the rocks where she has been thrown, and where the

water swirls indifferently across her, keeping her breathing, and only just alive.

"Why?" Ruth suddenly asks aloud, turning to Vivien.

"Why what?" Vivien says, looking away from the Turkish man towards Ruth.

"Why do you do this?" Ruth asks, and they quickly become entwined in argument. The Turkish man soon wanders away, not understanding and no longer interested, but neither Ruth nor Vivien notice. Oddly, there is something like affection that eases its way into this confrontation between them.

We're always busy at it, even in conversation. Sifting backwards, always backwards. Through fragments that never cohere. And as I watch Ruth and Vivien argue, a voice inside me speaks these fragments.

The flame of the candle leaned south, smoking black. Letters blew across his desk catching fire, the photograph on the wall of his father bottom-lit, dancing religiously. That night I first found him the wind was loud, wrestling across roof tops and down into the empty street. I couldn't hear the hum of fluorescence with the wind arguing across itself the way it was, but the rectangles of white light were a steady counterpoint to the mutter of wind chimes and cardboard clicking its way across the pavement. The wind blew along the dirty street and caught me in the eye with bits of grit. Men in black hurried down steps that led away from the white-

lit windows. I wanted to hear the hum, but the wind and the men would never let me. A cat pressed up against me and I touched him. He gurgled and gagged. Anyone listening would have thought he was swinging by his neck from a rope. He limped away and I was left alone with the wind and the white light, framed by thick bars of black.

Ellie wanders alone down onto the dock. A man standing in one of the boats smiles at her and waves for her to join him. She has walked past him here every day, and every day he has done this same thing.

Today Ellie steps onto the fishing boat, and the man who has summoned her smiles a little more broadly. He looks around for a moment to assure himself of an audience, and there's something ceremonial in the way he then steps forward and tosses the fish in his hand in the direction of Ellie. It slaps against her thigh and falls onto the deck gulping air, flipping around miserably until the man walks over to Ellie and swoops the fish up into his enormous hand and slits its belly open with a knife. He smiles malevolently at Ellie, then raises the fish in his hand until it's close enough to her face for her to see the frail veins of bone, the white membrane of a bladder, the flecks of blood. And she gets only the dwindling smell of salt off its skin. The familiar smell of fishy decay hasn't had time to settle in.

Something in the order of things makes her feel she has just witnessed a sacrificial rite, and she now gives the man what he's

looking for: she leans over the side of the boat and throws her lunch up into the water.

The fishermen on the dock laugh and continue to chatter in a language Ellie doesn't understand. She looks up at the man standing in front of her, then walks past him to the far end of the boat wiping her mouth on the edge of her shirt. He watches her, and continues to grin, until she leans over his catch and begins throwing fish back into the water, one by one. He stops smiling then and rushes over to her, yelling in Turkish. He grabs her by the arm and pulls her away from his fish. She walks back across the deck and through the people gathering on the dock to watch, the man still yelling behind her, and a few minutes later finds Vivien and Ruth standing alone where she left them, arguing over Vivien's morals. They seem to be the only two people who haven't been watching, and Ellie is aware of a string connecting them, even as they argue.

"Shut up you two," she says as she stops in front of them. And the words are intimate. Ruth and Vivien both look at Ellie.

"Where have you been?" they ask.

"Nowhere," she says. And in the quiet that follows they seem, for a moment, to flow together through the present.

These moments are loaned to us, and we assume they're ours to keep. Ruth is beautiful, and Vivien too. There are depths to their beauty that I hadn't noticed before.

It feels as if this is all I need, though I'm not sure quite what it is I mean. But it's in the presence of Vivien and Ruth as

they stand in front of me, shielding me from the friction of the air. For the moment, I find that my need for the water is quelled.

They linger a little, feeling the draw towards one another, until it begins, inevitably, to wane.

They continue on to the beach where they'll spend the afternoon mostly alone. The tourist season has long since ended.

Hamish doesn't need love anymore, he says he's got his bits of earth. But we were together once more, on a day when he had no money and thought he was losing his mind. And on that day he bullied me out of my clothes and over to the bed, and as I fell backwards I cracked my knee against the bed post. I swore and he pulled me off the bed and carried me over to the open window. He dropped me roughly onto the sill and the screen popped out and fell towards the street three stories below. I nearly went with it, but Hamish was still holding onto me. And when I looked over my shoulder I couldn't take my eyes off the falling screen.

It seemed suspended in mid-fall, and I thought at one point that it was coming back up at me. And as the screen fell, rose, then fell again, there was a question there that I couldn't quite formulate.

He sank his teeth into the flesh of my shoulder, he was all skin and bones by then; and I heard the screen rattle against the pavement. I turned again towards his pale face and for a moment he was liquid and light and shimmering space. But it was just the glare in my eyes from the sun hitting the mirror on the far wall.

The feather from a pigeon lay on the window ledge and I placed it in his hair and kissed him. We would never do this again.

Big objects attract smaller ones, and Hamish was drawn in by the glitter of a burning sun.

They settle in on the beach, and Ruth finds a stone shaped by centuries into the blade of a knife. Eolith, she says, showing it to Vivien, but Vivien sees it as a stone shaped like the blade of a knife. As Ellie stands up and starts walking into the water, Ruth drops to her knees and begins digging in the sand. Vivien prostrates herself, frozen beneath the sun with her eyes shut.

"What are you doing?" Ellie asks, watching Ruth from the water.

"Putting it back," Ruth says. Ellie doesn't quite understand what she means, but then Ruth usually means many things when she gives an answer like that, and Ellie doesn't feel like pursuing it. She grabs at the sand with her toes and drifts out on the water, pulling in her tentacles, one by one.

They say he shaved his head the day I left. When he falls, he'll never hit the ground. But I forget for a moment that he already has and that there is a question I still want to ask, and I turn away from him sitting at his desk, towards the ocean shimmering in front of me.

There is a moment of recognition between Ellie, Ruth and Vivien, a moment they will never speak of. When the hour contracted, swelled, then disappeared. A moment that binds and separates.

And the moment is this: when they stood alone beneath a bright three-quarter moon, isolated in the middle of a dirt field with two soldiers, armed and silent.

They spent their first day roaming through the town, taking note that a bakery with a blue sign hanging over the door, a stretch of broken-down shacks, and the oddly graffitied wall of a colourful restaurant, all marked the way back to their hotel. But when night came the town fell silent, and black, and there were no streetlights to help them find the bakery with the blue sign, the shacks, the graffitied wall. A man working at one of the restaurants near the waterfront summoned over the two soldiers, and gave them the name of the hotel that the women had given him. They stood together talking and smoking for a few minutes, while Ruth, Ellie and Vivien looked on. And then the soldiers turned abruptly and began walking away, and the man from the restaurant indicated to the women that they should follow. So they trailed behind the two men who walked indifferently on. They followed them through the dark streets, and then across a wide dirt field. And when they were far away from everything, and they saw the flash of moonlight off metal, each woman realized the possible dangers of the situation they were now in, isolated and alone with armed men at night, in a country where foreign women were considered whores. It was Vivien

who spoke. "What are we doing," was all she whispered to the other two. And the words frightened them more than the thought unspoken.

But the men kept walking, never looking back, and led them to the door of their hotel.

The afternoon trickles down as the sun makes its way across the sky. The heat, and the sun reflecting across the water, act as sedatives.

"The sun's so steady here," Vivien says, "it never disappears." She closes her eyes, seeming for once to trust that it will still be there when she opens them again. "Maybe I won't go back," she says quietly, "who says I have to?" The thought appears to have a greater calming effect, even, than the sun. Ruth smiles enigmatically, as though she has a hand in Vivien's new-found peace. But it's impossible to know, and Ellie doesn't ask.

They leave the beach, at the end of a day that will be swept up into the swell of all the others. They stop to pick up water and bread, and each time they hold a loaf of it in their hands, they speak of its strange porousness. Ellie says it's a living sponge, but Ruth disagrees, and says it's more like dry rot. "What the hell are you two talking about?" Vivien says. "It's a loaf of bread," and the conversation then moves on to other things.

Ruth is aware of the distances travelled in a day, and I think of this fact as we walk together past the shacks and the graffitied wall. She seems aware of many things without ever having

to be told. Ruth wants, I know, to keep me afloat, but it occurs to me that I'm already building my own cave out of rock face, well below the surface and out of all reach. And Ruth is aware of this too.

They return to their room, where they shower together in a bathroom that has no divisions. Ruth, though, is bleeding, and refuses to join them. Ellie sits naked on the edge of the sink washing the dirt from between her toes, while the water rushing down is deflected off Vivien's body and spraying Ellie, keeping her wet, the way she likes to be. She finishes with her feet and puts a toothbrush in her mouth, joining Vivien under the stream. Then Ruth is posing in the doorway in her underwear, with a cigarette between her lips and the camera blocking the rest of her face from view, and she clicks as Ellie leans forward to retrieve the soap from the floor. And what the camera sees beneath the wet swaths of hair is the rugged range of Ellie's arching vertebrae and the glistening shadows of her ribs; and Vivien beside her in the swamp, standing erect and cradling her breasts. But there's the blur of movement, Ellie rushing forward and Vivien's hands sweeping up, and the smoke and the steam getting in the way.

He's probably sitting in the fading light, at his desk with the cactus on it, turned away from the window and sucking his smoky dreams off the glitter of tin foil. And he'll wait for the moment when it washes over him, and the wait will sit like a bead of water that mostly refuses to fall.

Or maybe he has evolved by now, bypassed the wait and gone straight for the vein.

They sit down, clean and tired, feeling introspective, and so quiet, to the bread and the rotting fruit and the bottled water. Soon they will go out again, so that Vivien can feel that she has stretched time open and filled it out with activity. The days here tumble inconspicuously one over the other.

Ellie watches Ruth wrap her tongue around a collapsing section of orange and survey the room. Clothes lie in untidy piles on the floor, and the sheet on Vivien's bed is stained with a dotted trail of fading red, from a tomato that fell apart in Vivien's hand as she bit into it. "That feels like ages ago," Ruth says, though when she calculates aloud she finds that it was only this morning.

Ellie sees Vivien look at her fingers stained orange and can tell by her face that, for the moment, she is thinking of her return without panic. "It's good for me, you know," she suddenly says, meaning the physical fact of Ellie and Ruth sitting beside her. The sun dips low, and she watches it brightening the far corners of the room. "Soon," she says, more to herself than the others, "we'll go out to the beach and dance together all night." She takes another orange and holds it warmly in her palm.

Ellie glances up as she pulls the door closed behind them and notices again that there are no screens in the windows here.

The loaf of bread sits like a carcass on the table, and the crumbs are scattering in the breeze. And the question is still hanging there, still unformed, and she remembers that when she left him he was sitting at his desk, and he had put his fingers to his lips, like a deaf man signing Food, because he knew there was something she wanted to ask, and she knew that he had no answer to give.

And so they head out to the beach where they'll dance all night again tonight and no one will understand a word they say, but it doesn't matter. The music will rattle out like rainfall down a drain pipe, the same music over and over, and Vivien will try to escape the retreat of time in the arms of a Turkish man, while Ruth looks silently on. And Ellie, again, and again, will fight the urge to head for the depths of the water.