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Go Through the Waves, A Novel

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

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ABSTRACT

Go Through the Waves, A Novel

Susan Elizabeth Lee

Set in 1952 rural Wales, *Go Through the Waves* is an exploration of three generations of women. There is the grandmother, Gwyn Thomas, who continuously builds statues to communicate with unseen people, and who drowns in her search for them. Then there is Jane Evans who volunteers in the Korean War, and returns traumatised and haunted by the soldier who she killed accidentally and with whom she attempts to communicate through letters. Finally, there is the narrator, Megan, who believes that her unexpected pregnancy is caused by a woman she loves, and who embodies her family's legacy through remarkable visions.

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For women's impressions of wartime London, as well as the conditions that women faced as volunteers during World War II, I relied heavily upon *Women Overseas: Memoirs of the Canadian Red Cross Corps* edited by Frances Martin Day, Phyllis Spence and Barbara Ladouceur. I referred to Oliver Marriott's *The Property Boom* for my research on London's real estate market after World War II. Where Jane Evans' memories of combat were concerned, I relied on the following texts: Tim Carew's *Korea: The Commonwealth at War*, David Douglas Duncan's *This Is War!: A Photo-Narrative of the Korean War*, John Halliday and Bruce Cumings' *Korea: The Unknown War*, and Dennis Stairs' *The Diplomacy of Constraint: Canada, the Korean War and the United States*. In writing about Jane Evans' visions of the Korean War, I was influenced by *A Terrible Beauty: The Art of Canada at War* edited by Heather Robertson. A text that I relied heavily on for my research in post-traumatic stress reactions is *Human Adaptation to Extreme Stress: From the Holocaust to Vietnam* edited by John P. Wilson, Zev Harel and Boaz Kahana.

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Finally, for cultural history of the 1950's I relied on *Canada in the Fifties: Canada's Golden Decade (From the Archives of Maclean's)*.

Gwyn

On the cold beach after the sun has set, the moon is as round as a cat's eye. This is after the wind has died and there is only the sound of the water slowly shifting onto the shore, quietly heaving before it reaches the edge of the sand. The water turns, shifts, and turns again—movement without desire. On this slim moon night, the sea looks like thick mud. Only the small, lit tufts reveal that it is living. And the beach? It is still. It is cold, wet sand.

Gwyn imagines that she is other than herself. The decision is difficult. She does not know what she would rather be: the moon or the water. She goes back, looking at both, thinking of both. Which would she rather be? And then instead of finding an answer, she finds another question. Which would she rather be: the moon, the water, or the rocks? And then another. Which would she rather be: the moon, the water, the rocks, or the sky? Another. Which would

she rather be: the moon, the water, the rocks, the sky, or the long stretch of beach?

She has gone back to this length of sand again and again. It is her haunt. She walks it at night when she is not tired enough to close the day. And sometimes she goes when the moon is too bright and it slips its light beneath the soft, wet pink of her eyelids, drawing beams beneath them. Every sea needs a ghost, and so does the empty spread of beach that lies beside it. It is her, this beach ghost, this ghostly pale-woman. She haunts it as it is haunted by the unending drifts of water that empty onto it.

And what of fear, and everything associated with darkness? She does not have it. She is absolved. She does not fear darkness, because she knows that it is not real fear. Real fear is alive during the day. It winds a thin sheen along the body, running itself behind the eyeballs, binding the stomach, inserting itself into the ears and nostrils. It passes again and again around the senses until nothing seems real. The encasement is invisible. It is greater than the wet beach and the sky's black hide together. Looking at people continuing on with their lives, reading newspapers, eating sandwiches, or skipping rope, is beyond belief. On a quiet night, there is no one with whom to compare real fear. There is comfort. Sometimes she only knows what she is feeling because other people do not feel it.

I suppose I'll start by telling you what we did to my grandmother: we cocooned her first in several padded quilts and then in the old horse blanket that Thomas had been brushing clean the entire afternoon; we fastened a rope as thick as my fist around her shoulders, her chest, down her legs and tightly around her ankles, winding it again and again to ensure it was secure; at her head and at her feet we positioned two candles, and when they were lit, it looked like silk-threaded wings were breaking out of her sides and rising up and down against the light. After the preparations were complete, Thomas and I sat at a table beside my grandmother, who lay bound on the bench with her feet to the fireplace, and ate potatoes mashed with buttermilk in the first quiet the room had seen for days. He offered me my first drink of home brew and I took it, wanting to screen out the spectacle that he and I had created. For my inaugural sip, I tasted the gorse flower and nettle tops at the front of my mouth, and

during the remaining mouthfuls, I felt the slow closing of a valve in my awareness. The candles around my grandmother began to throw sparks and beam. Thomas took out the playing cards and we had a game of pinochle. After counting melds and tricks, I was declared the winner of the hand even though I'd tried to lose. The candle wax started to spatter. He said that we should take turns reading loudly over her.

I call to remembrance my song: and in the night I commune with
mine own heart, and search out my spirits.

“Louder than that,” Thomas hacked at me through his cigarette smoke.
“You’ll frighten nothing with such restraint.”

I tried to read louder, but was afraid of the way the words rifted against the wall, the way the candles seemed to waver with each word I mouthed, and the new possibility I had of awaking my grandmother. After that, Thomas stood up and left me. I hesitated, almost wanting to rush out after him—the door hadn’t caught the latch, but seemed snagged by the wind, neither closing nor slamming back against the house, but strangely suspended, hovering and buffeted by the biting gale that held it there motionless. The letter that I’d received from my mother was thrown from the mantelpiece to the floor just in front of my feet. My stomach was crawling and the hot taste of alcohol hung on my breath. My grandmother, trussed in stout cord, had a flush to her. I reached out to touch her, to see if it was all real.

An object struck the house. My hand pulled back. I held myself for a few seconds. The sound of footsteps on the roof came in vacant echoes into the bowl of the room. They stopped near the chimney. Something ticked gently down its sides dislodging some of the soot so that it sounded like rain was falling in driblets into the house. A moment later a horseshoe swung back and forth in the hearth. From where I was standing behind my grandmother, it seemed like the broken pendulum of a clock. There was a beating in my ears—they vibrated as if hands were being cupped on and off my head—and it happened every time I looked around the room and saw the wax running along the bench and my grandmother sealed in a dark weave.

A hollow voice came from above the floating horseshoe, “Take the rope.”

To grasp it, I would have had to walk around my grandmother. The two of us were frozen there, and I couldn’t move until she did. We had formed a delicate vision. She was horizontal and hovering above the earth and I was still grounded to it by the soles of my feet. It took me a moment to notice that Thomas was back in the house blowing into the clench of his hands. He patted my shoulder with the broad pads of his fingers and nodded at me as he brushed by my grandmother to the fireplace. He unfastened the rope that was attached to the horseshoe and trailed it out of the chimney over to her. After he fixed himself above her, he watched the place where her face would have been, and almost seemed to be waiting for her approval. I guessed that after a short while he obtained it, because he bent to the work of wrapping the rope around her. Beginning by hooking it in circles tightly to her legs, he brought it around and

about her, in many passes, each time yanking more rope from out of the chimney.

Before going back outside, Thomas drifted by the open door, took out his tobacco pouch, and started to turn a cigarette. “Maayguun,” he drew my name out. “Don’t worry yourself. It will be over before you know it, and then we can forget about it. Tomorrow will feel like it never happened. Remember,” he paused and licked the edge of the white rolling paper held in the grime of his fingers, “we’re only doing this because we were asked.”

“You were asked, Thomas,” I pressed slowly as I looked past his shoulder to the shifting shadow it slung on the wall.

“Ten more minutes and it’s over.” He put the cigarette end in his mouth.

“What if someone comes, what if one of our neighbours drops by?” I insisted.

He added with a kind smile, “I’ll make you a pudding after it’s done. It’ll warm you before bed. All right?”

Then he left me alone for a second time with the thick sack that I knew was my grandmother. At that moment, I truly suffered in my heart, because I knew that what we were doing was right and good. I had a duty to my grandfather; he would have gone through anything for me. But there was something else—a sense of heaviness—that told me I shouldn’t have been there. There was a line that I was crossing, some invisible field that surrounded me, and that made it seem like I was stepping out of myself into an otherness. I didn’t understand this new consciousness and the way it made everything seem unreal—the candlelight glowing against my skin in shafts, my eyes that witnessed

the scene before me and reflected back only its exultation—all seemed like they weren't quite a part of me.

“There is a code encrypted within our being,” my grandmother had told me almost as soon as I'd arrived there. I may have laughed or nodded, but then she'd pushed, “It is best to stay away from that part of us. Away and secreted. Enclosed within a hardened shell,” and she'd demonstrated by laying her tender, leathered hands over mine and squeezing them together in a startlingly strong hold.

Thomas called to me through the flue again. The length of rope leading up the chimney was taut. I watched as it was tugged another arm's length. The grey shroud in which my grandmother lay, bridled and collared by twists of ropes, jerked suddenly along the bench. Another haul from the top of the chimney and she was jarred towards the fireplace. She passed over the last dribble of the candles, smearing her shroud in uneven lines of white wax. It was the first murmur that I'd caught from her in a while—it wasn't her voice as I'd half expected, but the creaking of wood and the bending and chafing of rope on the bricks. Just as she was wrenched off the bench, I grabbed the rope that was tied around her chest and cautiously lowered her down. She coasted along the floor in an effortless glide, smooth and uninterrupted like a sailboat being driven homewards by softly arching waves. When she reached the large stone opening of the fireplace, she drifted upwards so that she almost seemed to be floating into the hearth, venturing weightlessly. But she didn't hover there for long, as the angle into the chimney was very narrow. I had to take hold of the ropes around her shoulders and budge her aside. It was awkward and I found her

heavy. I hollered up to Thomas to drag her up in smaller tugs. This technique manipulated her into the ideal position. I told Thomas that he could pull her up as quickly as he wished. He bellowed through the smoke-stack that he was doing his best, but that she wasn't stirring.

There was a slight coolness that stroked my back even though I had my woollies on, and then a numb sweat broke out across my forehead. I had a feeling of being unstrung. I was holding my grandmother just a couple inches off the floor, and it was impossible to look into the chimney to see where she was stuck.

"Is it all right if we don't take her all the way up the chimney?" I yelled to Thomas.

"What, you want to abandon everything just as we've almost reached the most important part?" Thomas complained from the roof in a hollow cough.

"Thomas, I can't keep her head off the floor and fix what's blocking her legs." I heard my voice catch in the chimney and echo back to me, my arms aching from my grandmother's weight.

"Well, do what's most important," his voice wavered down to me. "We've got to unblock her legs. Stand her on her head."

"Don't you think it's disrespectful?" I heaved up to him, the rope now severing the circulation in my fingers and the feeling in them beginning to sway.

"She won't mind if it's for a higher cause," his answer resonated vaguely.

So I very delicately deposited my grandmother's head on the flagstones in front of the fireplace. And while doing so, I mouthed a secret apology. She was so stiff that it didn't seem to make a difference anyway.

The wide opening to the fireplace had once been used for cooking as well as a reservoir for heat. My grandmother had told me that everything from breads and cakes to soups and roasts had been made in it. We'd tried it only two weeks before, she and I, cooking junket there and warming the milk to "blood heat" as the recipe had read. "You may discover that you have the ability to see, to envision," my grandmother had said as she motioned me to take the wooden spoon that she was holding in the soft knots of her fingers and stir in the rennet. She continued, "It is normal for us. Don't question it. Don't go into it. It will come and it will pass. Just let it happen," and she poured in the caster sugar that dissolved and vanished as soon as it hit the surface of the blood hot milk.

I hunched and squatted sideways in that same place where the flames had recently licked and sputtered. When I stood up, it was into the chimney. I had thought that it would be claustrophobic to be contained in that small space with my grandmother—me standing on my feet and her on her head. But I felt nothing like that. The chimney was a large rectangle and its spout opened directly upwards. The moon outside was blazing, and I could see the shapes of the blackened brick on the inside of the chimney. When I looked up, I could just make out the edge of Thomas' outline. He had decided to take a rest and was lighting a cigarette. I could tell that he was drained from the way his shoulders were swelling up and down.

I reached around in the glowing darkness, feeling near my grandmother's feet. I could hear breathing—my own I guess. But the way it came back to me from against the walls made it feel like the breath was surrounding my

grandmother and me, like there was some very subtle force pressing against us and holding us there. I began to hurry, my fingertips dabbing the soot on the bricks. I felt the length of rope ascending into the chimney, her bound feet and legs, and the harsh brush of the horse blanket against my hands. But there were no obstructions—no chimney swifts with their wide, gaping mouths or their cementlike nests saliva-glued, no jutting stones from the fireplace clumsily layered, no fluted masonry rivets or dual-headed nails. I took hold of her feet and tipped them from the wall. They moved much more easily than I'd expected—almost like a gigantic child's toy top.

"Sorry, I must be growing weak in my old age," Thomas sniffed. "I'd swear she was stuck in the chimney."

"Everything seems fine now. Why don't you try pulling her up again?" I squatted down to get out of the fireplace.

"Heh... Please?" Thomas interjected. "Just stay until it's finished, just so that this doesn't happen again. We'll have double cream with the pudding," he added.

I stayed, but not so much for Thomas as for my grandmother's poor head. I hoped that it wouldn't later betray what we'd done to her.

The cigarette must have invigorated Thomas, because he didn't have any difficulty when he next tried to haul my grandmother up the chimney. Twisting, she hovered past me, floating through the moon-filtered light in her dark encasement. I did my best to stand to the side, but once she made a small thud against the wall of the chimney. I framed my hands around her in protection.

There was something lovely about the way she was ascending towards the moon with her soles pointed up, effortless and quite tranquil, finally emancipated and at peace. It was as if she was walking on the floor of the sharply lit sky. As Thomas continued to draw my grandmother upwards, I had to move under her to maintain my hold. My fingers were outstretched to where her ears would have been. A small space stopped the tops of our heads from meeting; the rest of our bodies fell in opposite directions. There was a breath again, pressing—it was my own, I knew it was. But there was something else, a memory I had of her.

“Be as you would have, Megan.” My grandmother had pointed at me as a furious crash drove itself onto the beach. I didn’t understand her meaning with the waves turning as quickly as they were, and told her so. She misunderstood me and repeated, “Be as you would have. Be as you would,” and we’d continued our walk along the beach with the whipping of the wind stopping up our mouths and even taking hold of our ears. I thought that she meant I should pursue what I desired in life. I’d wanted to be a doctor.

While standing in the chimney with the moonlight cambering around us, and her head dropping towards mine back down the chimney, feeling like her mind was emptying into my mind, I realised that my grandmother must have meant something else. The thought disappeared as Thomas wasn’t being delicate, but was letting her plunge downwards. I tried to take hold of her, but found it unnecessary as she slid back out onto the wooden floor.

I sat there with her for a while, exhausted, and so Thomas took care of the business of untying and unravelling her. He only needed my help to slide her

back into the coffin, where, with eyes closed and soothed, the sweet breath held
and stilled, flashing in the candlelight that shifted against the wall, my
grandmother lay in serenity once again.

Oh yes, I should have started with something else. My apologies—my mind works in peculiar ways, looping and meshing events in and out of their order. That morning before we dragged the body up the chimney, I received yet another letter from my mother. I knew that I could tell Una about the letter when I saw her at my grandmother's wake—our neighbours' faces in movement and conversation were set off against Una's smooth composure, as she sat alone, without Iwan, a steaming bowl of *cawl* held between your palms. There was something very sensible and practical about her stillness, some constancy in a world where it was possible for my grandmother to vanish. I asked her to meet me that evening outside our house.



The trail that she would have to go on later that night was one of the most inspirational I'd ever taken. The path was flattened mud and almost felt like it unravelled under one's feet, each step seemed to push aside the grass and the heather that stole through the land, a few petals at a time. The trail bowed into small crevices and you couldn't help sinking into it, while the ocean rose up into the sky, disappeared, and became part of the ether. It felt as if it was a walk beneath the sea, and the water was swelling above it.

The last time that I had taken that walk was almost a month before. Thomas, my grandmother, and I had gone over to the Wynn-Ellises for *Noson Lawen*. It was an old Welsh tradition held to celebrate the successful bringing in of the hay harvest, always a big event due to the hap of the Welsh weather. We had gone there on a long, dark autumn night to partake in the usual festivities of reciting impromptu verses. I had been excited about the evening until Thomas had told me that everyone was supposed to show his or her talents. I hadn't been interested in performing—my curiosity lay in drinking out of the wassail bowl. Thomas told me that its contents were always made quite potent. The immense bowl was lined with sugar, then warm beer was added, then spices, sherry, more warm beer and more sugar. After it had sat for a while, even more sugar was added and roasted apples were floated on top of it.

"The Welsh love anything out of a bowl, Megan," Thomas had told me. "That way, they know that their food won't escape from them or be taken away by someone."

I'd never thought about food being taken away, or of it escaping for that matter. How could a drink escape from a bowl? I'd imagined it forming fingers

and pulling itself out of the dish in which it was contained, rising all of its own accord in a thick mass, so that the person who had intended to drink it was compelled to chase it around a room and take small sips from it by mouthing its warm liquid, very quickly swallowing it, and then continuing to chase after the remainder of the drink as it hovered and swam about.

“And if we manage to finish the contents of the wassail bowl, there’ll probably be enough ale and cider to last us the rest of the evening,” Thomas had said just before we’d reached the Wynn-Ellises, giving me a wink.

“There’s more important things than the drink, Megan,” my grandmother had affirmed to me, shouldering her way into the conversation after a long silence. We had been slowly walking out of a crevice and the sea was returning to the horizon. “There are verses that will be said in a language that you don’t know. You will remember this evening.”

“I’m sure I’ll remember it,” I’d answered her.

“What’s that?” she’d asked me. Her hearing seemed to be going more and more with each passing week.

“I’ll remember it,” I’d repeated one pitch louder.

“Remember it. Yes, remember it, Megan. Remember it,” she’d repeated back at me. And then she turned away, saying, “Ooooh, look at the way the dusk light strikes the water. The sea is changing its mood.”

And then she had gone off, wearing a kind of shine around her eyes, where her own thoughts leaned into the water, without time, without any kind of discussion. She always told me that any one moment would never happen again,

that it would disappear and be gone. And it was best not to regret it, not to let that kind of mood curse the perfect smoothness of life.

"Looks like we're only a fag's distance away," Thomas had muttered out of the side of his mouth while he rolled a cigarette. "Care to try one, Megan?"

"Not for me," I'd answered.

"I'll have one if you don't mind, Thomas," my grandmother had said as she suddenly stooped down, as if dodging an object.

"Are you all right, Gwyn?" I'd questioned her.

She'd paused for a moment. "Are you?" she'd questioned me back, taking a strong hold of my arm while Thomas had chortled.

I had never really understood her. She always spoke in a way that allowed me to forget what she had said. My grandmother's voice could be airy, not really striking at anything, but avoiding meaning. When I would ask her to repeat something, she would often mumble into a new conversation. Thomas never seemed to complain about her manner of speaking. And I began to feel that to do so would ruin the bizarre custom of not understanding what she said. How would I like it if someone told me how to speak, while everyone else seemed to be able to understand what I was saying? How would I like it if someone said that I was filling the earth with skeletons of meaning? So I would tell my grandmother that I knew what she said, that I understood what she meant although I almost never did. Besides, what was the point of getting to the root of the words she had spoken? So I swallowed what she said like soup, and tried to ignore what I didn't understand.

On my part, I found that at times, talking could bring up the most unpleasant sensations in me, even nausea. I suppose I'd inherited that trait from my mother who was still in Korea, and who in turn, had inherited it from my grandmother. Whenever my mother and I would talk, I'd always say a different version of what was really in my head. I believe my mother did also. It was as if there was something that we couldn't talk about—a thorny matter pushed aside.

And really, I was comfortable not talking. That's not because I'm naturally suited to silence, although that's the state in which I normally exist. Those days, my thoughts felt too private to share with anyone. They were thoughts of Una with her hair spread out, as if she was on a forest floor. What was it that had made me think of her then, just before I was going to see her for the first time since I'd witnessed her in our barn? I wondered if she would have changed, or if she always lay on the hay with her eyes closed whenever she could find a quiet barn, and had been doing so for years despite the fact that she was a bit older than me. There was something ancient in it. It allowed me to see my destiny—or maybe it was my fate.

While I was thinking, my grandmother had mumbled words. I thought I heard her say, “a figure approaching on the road...in a long coat...walking just like us.”

Thomas didn't say anything. He'd seemed like he was too busy enjoying his smoke. With one hand, I'd gripped the other as if I was trying to pull a door closed.

“A figure approaching,” my grandmother had said.

And once more, Thomas hadn't seemed to notice what she was saying. I'd wanted to tell her to stop, or I'd wanted to swerve away from whatever she was seeing, but we'd continued walking and they'd continued smoking.

"Approaching," my grandmother had said.

I'd wanted to turn around and look backwards, but I kept walking. And when we'd come to the place that my grandmother had been talking about, I looked at her. It was then that I saw an impact of some sort in her, as if the figure or whatever it was that she'd been mumbling about had passed directly through her, as if she had ceased to exist. It was worrisome and uncomfortable. I felt more startled than anything else. What was it that I thought I'd seen entering her body so quickly and then leaving? A nameless, faceless thing, and my grandmother all the while with the secret knowledge of having another body inside of her, relinquishing her own, and becoming something else—but what?

My grandmother was very slow in walking to the Wynn-Ellis' house after that. While Thomas finished the last of his cigarette, I held her arm and fell in step with her as she shuffled her feet along the path. She seemed to hold one leg dragging slightly behind her as if it no longer worked. It was as if she'd been injured. But only a moment later, I felt that I had been wrong in thinking that. There didn't seem to be anything the matter with her anymore. She walked as she normally did with her back straight. I couldn't see the truth in any of it—she looked completely healed, the entire experience forgotten. She seemed worn by the time she'd finished walking up to the Wynn-Ellis'.

Inside was a very hard smell to identify, something like a cross between a wet, wool-hair coat that had once been worn while hunting, and the waking moment right before the end of a dream.

Immediately after we'd been seated in the kitchen along with Owen and the twins, Jan Wynn-Ellis had said to my grandmother, "I made one of your favourites, Gwyn. Simmering duck with onion sauce."

"You shouldn't have," my grandmother had responded. "It takes so much time to salt."

"I know it's your favourite," Jan Wynn-Ellis had replied, her cheeks pinking. "I rubbed and re-rubbed the skin with sea salt and turned it for three days."

"Now I see. So that's the reason that you sent Una over for the heavy double pan," my grandmother had nodded as she plucked out her pipe from the pocket of her sweater.

Yes, and that was the reason that Una was in our barn, I'd thought while I watched Thomas and Pugh Wynn-Ellis take out the carving knives and sharpener, and talk about the best way to bring out a strong edge. My grandmother must have told Una that she could go ahead and get the pan in our barn where the heavy cooking equipment was kept. Una would have assumed that in the quiet of the afternoon, no one would have been in the barn. It would have been the kind of place where a young woman could do whatever she wanted. She could lay her body on a length of hay and spread her hair out, she could lie down as if in a stream with her legs dangling off the edge of the bail, listening to the swallows opening and closing their beaks in high, strong verse

while conceiving of herself in quivering water, and she could fight her sleepiness until everything that came out of her eyes was in black and white spots.

So that was it. There was no mystery. She hadn't set out to find me in the barn—no following or pining or heartbeat. It was only the girl next door in search of a pan, and a quiet nap. Maybe I'd created stories for myself because I was afraid to live in reality. Perhaps reality was too dull at the moments when it sat there with its pot belly and stopped moving and changing. I had a need to move it or change it. But really, there was no reason, there was no drama. I had thought that Una had gone to the barn in search of me in the second-floor loft—I was lying on the floor above the bails where she went for her nap—that she would get there breathless with wide, blue eyes. But nothing like that had happened. My reality was buried under all my imaginings, and like my grandmother, I sometimes disappeared.

But I knew that I hadn't really disappeared, because when Una had come back from work that evening, she'd hesitated by the door and looked at me. My hair had been held to the top of my head with a red scarf twisted around itself, and the dress I'd been wearing hung off my shoulders just slightly. I'd started rotating the days that I wore my clothes, so that I wore the same outfit on the same day of each week. I counted back the days to the one that I'd seen her in the barn. It had been one week before exactly: I was wearing the same dress the day I'd watched her there. Even my hair was the same, all held back from my face.

I bemoaned the fact that in that day and age when almost any food came in a can and bombs could incinerate the planet, that no one had thought of

creating a humiliation machine. I thought that a humiliation machine would be one that could detect dangerous levels of embarrassment or shyness. And when those signs were detected, such as that very moment when it seemed like Una was observing me to see whether or not I was the person who had been watching her in the barn, I would become invisible. It was the only thing that I wanted—that, and to try to think of some way to become involved in the conversation that Owen was having with my grandmother about his school project. But it was difficult, I had my visions as usual.

I saw Una in the barn again. She was lying in the soft hay below. I could see her through the crack in the boards of the floor. I held my face closely there and I could smell the wood and the innumerable steps that had been taken on it. One had been the steps of a child hurrying to bed over the cold wooden floor above the sheep—the smell of new skin, skin still singing of its fresh pinkness. I perceived that another smell had been the hesitant and fearful steps of a young man who had not shaved for some time and who also didn't have the ability to grow a full beard. A child-boy some people called him and he would have hated it and thought that he'd show them and everyone. He was up to mischief in the barn when the tenants were away one of those rare evenings for a drink and some song—his foot was the smell of something spoiled, a block of cheese that had been set to ripen but left for too long, a foot forced into old boots without being washed first. I also sensed, as I lay on that floor and saw Una there lying below me on the hay, one other foot that had stepped purposefully in that place, the foot of a not-quite-old woman who considered herself old. It had happened when her own mother had died and she suddenly became old. With nothing to

do other than stare at the sea and wait for her husband to return home from tending the sheep, and when he did, he would put his hands softly on her face so that he could feel her cool skin. Her foot was the smell of something worn, the smell also of the warm lard that had been rubbed on them in the morning after a breakfast of simmered bread crusts, and finally, they were the smell of stillness, like a piece of wood bobbing on the same wave night after night. I had smelt all these things when I'd seen Una there lying on the hay, as if she were waiting for someone to arrive.

But now there was only the smell of Jan Wynn-Ellis' salted duck. And there was something else was taking my attention from the memory of that day—Pugh Wynn-Ellis and his talk of me leading the Noson Lawen.

"Usually, the evening's full of poetry that's read from the ancients," Pugh Wynn-Ellis said as he passed me a glass of ale. "It's normally done entirely in Welsh, but you can tell stories instead of reading," Pugh Wynn-Ellis suggested while motioning towards me.

"You mean stories about Canada?" I questioned. "I've never been very good at storytelling."

"Not Canada, necessarily," Pugh Wynn-Ellis said, as he passed Thomas a freshly rolled cigarette and Thomas took it slowly from him and smiled at it as if he'd never seen a cigarette before. "I thought a few stories from Korea might be good. After all, the Welsh are partaking in this war and we have to think of them today of all days."

"Stories from Korea," I paused. "I only have them second hand from letters that I've received from my parents. I wouldn't know what to talk about or what anyone's interested in." I crossed my arms and shifted my weight, looking at the twins who were reading a book together in the corner by the icebox.

"It doesn't matter," Pugh Wynn-Ellis insisted, nodding at Owen who nodded back to him. "It could be anything. I could even tell a story now."

"Go ahead," prompted Jan Wynn-Ellis, who had begun to set the table. "Why put Megan on the spot to tell stories on her own? We all have stories to tell, we've all lived through wars. You go first Wynn-Ellis if you're so anxious to have these stories told."

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea," added Una, who I could have sworn was still looking at me curiously.

"Very well then," Pugh Wynn-Ellis said as he weighed his stomach in both hands. Then hesitating, he picked up the carving knife and went to the table, "But first, let's have at the salt duck."

And we did.

It was not long after supper had finished that he began his story with a long, rumbling belch. I felt nervous that Una was going to say something to me. Or accuse me. I didn't really know how I could tell a story about the Korean War. I'd eaten my meal so quickly and had taken a too-large second serving of duck overflowing with onion sauce at the prompting of Jan Wynn-Ellis who'd smiled fully and approvingly and said, "Grand, isn't it?"

"Oh, Wynn-Ellis," Jan Wynn-Ellis said as she brought her apron up to her nose. The twins giggled. "How could you in front of our guests?"

Pugh Wynn-Ellis didn't respond, but instead offered a round of drinks from the wassail bowl. It was so strong that I ended up choking on it.

"Well, that's part of my story," Pugh Wynn-Ellis began, as he blew a puff of smoke onto the flowers that decorated the table. "I wanted to talk about the trench war and the gassing." He smiled slightly. "It was a different world in the trenches, as if no other world existed."

"Wynn-Ellis," Jan Wynn-Ellis frowned. "This is not the kind of talk we should have at a celebration."

"Like the underground during the blitzkrieg," Thomas interjected, ignoring Jan Wynn-Ellis' complaint. Motioning his head towards my grandmother, Thomas said, "Gwyn and I came to know our little wooden bench at Euston Station very well. Our belongings were tucked underneath it and we took turns sleeping in the down coverlet that we brought with us every night. I began to get used to it. The sounds of babies' cries in the tunnel reminded me of rooster's calls in my childhood. I woke up feeling happy almost."

I'd never heard these stories about my grandparents in the war. Since I'd been living with them for the past several months, we'd only spoken about everyday events. But it seemed as though my grandmother didn't know that story either, because she looked at Thomas' shoulder in amazement.

"That's right, man. It becomes everything. You adapt. Like the world of the trenches was my life for a year," Pugh Wynn-Ellis continued, taking a napkin, folding it, and bringing it across his forehead while Jan Wynn-Ellis looked apologetically at me. "Gas came over the fields in grey clouds that could kill any man—it was worse than strangulation and it was far more fearful. Then

there were the charges through No Man's Land when we'd have to rush blindly through the mud and barbed wire into the Germans' dugouts. And once in their trenches, we'd have to evacuate the entire place. I remember running through mud-packed walls, seeing cans of brown-coloured food that had been thrown aside, a bowl full of water that still had a razor in it, a kettle boiling with its lid popping up and down." He motioned his cigarette over his glass of ale to demonstrate, moving it up and down as if a strong thread of steam was still forcing itself out of the very same kettle. "It was also almost an entire year without sleep. That's my story. That's why I'm thankful when I can be with my family and friends, eat a huge, wonderful meal, knowing that I'll be having a good, long sleep in my own bed. Honestly, I never slept. It was because I was afraid that I'd never wake up. Some people didn't. I spent most of the time staring at the wooden plank walls in front of me. It got so that I knew the lines in the grains of the wood and the buckles on its surface. And the mud walls also became familiar to me. Long after everyone on my shift had fallen asleep and the evening guard was whispering amongst themselves, I would be awake, looking at the lumps on the walls. I'll tell you—war can make a man mad, but there's nothing like the absence of sleep to drive him there fastest.

"I imagine that neither of your parents are going through this, eh Megan? After all, it's not a trench war that they're in." Pugh Wynn-Ellis leaned over his end of the table towards where I was sitting.

"No," I answered, as I watched my grandmother blow smoke from her pipe upwards and then twist its bowl around in her hands. But I wasn't quite

sure what question he was asking—whether they were going mad or whether they were getting enough sleep.

“So they’re getting enough sleep, then?” he clarified the question, while everyone slumped away from the table, all with bellies full of silky duck.

“According to the letters from my father,” I began to answer Pugh Wynn-Ellis, “it’s often so cold that they sleep in their clothes. And they usually have to get up at some point during the night for emergencies that are flown in. There’s a siren that wakes them up for those situations. Then they’re in the operating room until it becomes light outside.” I knotted my forehead after I said that, suddenly feeling worry for them.

“Enough of this talk, Wynn-Ellis. You’re not to fret, Love,” Jan Wynn-Ellis broke in, turning to me. “I know that your parents are safe right now. And sleeping like babes, I imagine. Let’s get back to the evening’s cheer. How about a verse? A verse. Anyone? How about Gwyn?” she said to my grandmother.

“Ta-ra, Jan,” my grandmother said. “Yes, I’m able to, now that I’ve had the three comforts of old age: fire, tea, and tobacco.”

“So what poet will it be, Gwyn?” Pugh Wynn-Ellis said with a shake of his shoulder, visibly shedding our conversation.

“Oh, I think it’ll be my favourite. One of the last, great court poets,” my grandmother answered. “*Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch*.”

“His lament on the death of Lewellyn?” Una questioned.

“The very one,” my grandmother replied.

“How do you know the poem, Una? Has Iwan been instructing you after he finishes teaching at the school?” Pugh Wynn-Ellis seemed bewildered.

“No, he teaches English literature, not Welsh. And you know I haven’t seen him lately what with work being so busy. Anyway, I read it myself. I do have a library card you know.” Una sighed loudly, taking a big sip of ale from her glass.

“Ssshhh. You two can talk about that later. Go ahead Gwyn,” Jan Wynn-Ellis nodded at my grandmother who began reciting the poem.

*Oeruelawe callon dan vronn o vraw,
Rwyd val crinwyd yssyn crinaw.
Pony welwch chwi hynt y gwynt ar glaw?
Pony welwch chwi r deri yn ymdaraw?
Pony welwch chwi r mor un merwindaw yr tir?
Pony welwch chwi r gwir yn ymgyweiraw?
Pony welwch chi r heul yn hwylaw r awyr?
Pony welwch chwi r syr wedyr syrthiaw?
Och hyt attat ti duw na daw mor tros dir!*

*Pa beth yn gedir y ohiriaw?
Nyt oes le y kyrcher rac carchar braw,
Nyut oes le y trigyer: och or trigyaw!*

“It’s so moving,” Thomas said, as he took two puffs of his cigarette in swift succession, which I thought was to hide the edge of a tear that had formed in one of his eyes.

“Potent,” declared Una, and I thought that she was as soon as she said it.

“*Areithi Cymraeg?*” Jan Wynn-Ellis asked me.

“She doesn’t,” my grandmother answered for me.

“So you missed the entire poem, then,” Owen said.

I nodded.

“I can recite it in English if you like, but it only gives a hint of the power of the Welsh original,” Una said to me, and she began.

Lying cold under a breast of fearful pity,
Lust shrivels up like dried kindling.

Do you not see the way of wind and rain?
Do you not see the oaks beating together?
The sting of the sea against the shore?
Do you not see the anguish of the truth?
Can you not see the sun's path in the sky?
The falling of the great stars?
Why does the sea not cover the land?

Why are we left here to linger?
There's no place to hide from fear's prison,
Nowhere left to dwell, such a dwelling!

It was difficult to listen to these words, because I knew that later, I would lie awake waiting to hear them. There would be no way to get any sleep either—counting sheep, making up songs in my head, imagining home. Nothing would work. Every creak, every sound in the house would almost begin to sound like the words Una had spoken, warming and waking me until they stretched into all of my dreams.

“Lovely,” I said, looking at Una for as long as I found comfortable, then turning to my grandmother, “You’ll have to teach me the Welsh version now.”

“Yes, Megan,” she answered me. “Sleep and the cool Welsh air. The lullaby against the land.”

“Pardon me?” I said to her.

“Oh yes, Gwyn. The difficult pronunciations too,” added Thomas to my grandmother’s last phrase. He seemed to be able to follow the trail left by the string of her conversation. No one else seemed to be concerned that what she had just said made absolutely no sense.

“Speaking of land. I think we should return to our readings.” Pugh Wynn-Ellis passed a book to the twins and we all went into the parlour to hear them read.



That evening was a month before my grandmother died and we dragged her up the chimney. Had I known that I only had one more month with her, I would have savoured it much more, I would have taken the words that she spoke and bathed my memory with them. But instead, Una had offered to teach me Welsh, and I bathed in the words that she voiced. *Hysgubor*—barn. *Yf*—drink. *Llowcia*—swallow. *Gwynnwy*—white. *Chwhwa*—wave. She would meet me near my grandparents' house after I returned from school since she knew the way better. Then we'd walk down to the beach, and I'd listen to how the language that Una spoke pulsed like the waves peeling onto the beach.

The night of the wake, I delayed getting out of bed until I could hear Thomas' soft snoring. While waiting, I recited the words that I could remember of that poem to myself in English—Una hadn't yet taught me the Welsh version: "The sting of the sea against the shore? Do you not see the anguish of the truth?"

I slept in the room behind the stove in the kitchen, while my grandmother and Thomas had had separate rooms upstairs. My room had actually been part of a large muck room. It still had the smell of damp shoe leather, sand, and wet dogs. It was a place that had been spat in, sat in, smoked in—the first place where tired bodies full of a day's work would have come to sit, where they could ease themselves into exhaustion. There was probably two hundred years of fingerprints, dead skin, and hair beneath the layers of plaster. And under that,

embedded in the outer walls, there may have been pennies, hair, cup handles, bones, and bronze figurines.

My room had three massive windows that took up the large outer wall. Through them, I could see a plain of grass, an endless haul of green. Sometimes when the moon was gleaming and I couldn't sleep, I'd think about myself in the room. I'd say: you are a bright point of light. And I'd see it, beginning in my chest and then flaming outwards across my body to my hands and feet. My room looked out on the flat board of field. To gaze at the ocean and catch the sky with my widened eyes, just like my grandmother had, was vital. The first thing my grandmother saw after she was born was the sea, and it was the last thing she had wanted to witness before she died. I had begun to think the same thing. I would have regretted it if I'd gotten sick and died in that room with the view of the dark green expanse. I always thought that I would prefer it if my bed were taken to the beach so that when high tide came, I could just be swept out with it.

When I finally left my room to meet Una, it didn't seem that dark. Everything was still glowing like it had when Thomas and I had dragged my grandmother up the chimney. My eyes felt puffed from crying. I passed through the kitchen, avoiding where she lay in the coffin in the main room. While Dewi roused, I put my boots on, a warm sweater and a raincoat. I only worried that Thomas might be woken when I broke the tight seal of the door and felt the air rush by me into the house. It had the hard force of salt, brine, oil, icebergs, and the smell of an old wind that always swept back and forth over the same bay.

I could see Una's eyes in the dark as I left the house. They were a cobalt, azure, cerulean—an unworldly ocean blue even to their piths. Dewi went ahead of us just slightly, his blond coat reflecting the moon's glare.

“Megan, your grandmother's in heaven this minute,” Una began, bracing herself against a gust of wind. “I know this. There is no doubt in my mind. She's enjoying herself there. She's at peace with herself, with you, with your grandfather and everything else that she experienced in her life.”

“I didn't actually want to talk to you about my grandmother.” I could feel the well of my throat filling with tears. I pushed them back down and wiped my eyes. “I wanted to show you this letter.” I reached into my raincoat's pocket and brought out the blue envelope that had my name written on it in tidy lettering. “It's from my mother,” I hastened, a grain of worry entering my mind, its shallow taproot lightly taking hold for an instant. “Let's keep walking,” I suggested, feeling suddenly like we might be overheard.



Our walk was like a walk to the end of the world. The land was directly in front of us, its slight slope ran to nothing. It was like walking to the end of the earth. The earth stopped. It dropped and disappeared. There was only the ocean. And it stretched. The ocean spread out like some giant woman's watery hair that never stopped shimmering, not even for one single moment. Wales is the end of the earth. Wales is the beginning of the earth.

Wales is the asshole of the world.

Thomas told me that when I'd first arrived. He had claimed that some historian wrote it in the nineteenth century.

"What does it mean to be the 'ass hole' of the world?" I'd asked him.

We had been standing outside the house one evening before supper, when he had touched my shoulder and motioned out to the horizon.

"It means that Wales is the oldest country in the world. It's the place from which everything flows—all the water, all the spirits, all the stars," he'd answered.

"I see," I said and nodded. "What kind of ass hole do you mean exactly?" I'd asked. This was where some confusion arose, because I'd somehow never really connected the two words together.

He cleared his throat. "Any kind of asshole you want it to be," was his answer. He'd laughed and then sucked on his cigarette.

Ass hole: I thought it was either a natural cleft in the ground where donkeys could take shelter from the rain; or it was something akin to a manhole for the securing of asses should there be another war.



I heard those words on my walk with Una. They comforted me. I pulled the hood of my raincoat down over my head, down over my ears, and listened to what it sounded like to be in the ass hole of the world. I heard a hollow sound like a muted ocean and the sound of my breath escaping out of my body, nothing more.

“Why did you want to show me your mother’s letter?” Una asked, as we stood above the long drop to the beach.

“She wrote that she’s returning earlier than expected—by a couple of months,” I opened the letter and turned it towards the moon to see the handwriting with its fantastic arches.

“That’s wonderful news, Megan,” Una smiled while squinting at the almost illegible scratches. “This is the best timing possible, what with the shock of your grandmother passing so suddenly. Your mother’s return is just what you need.”

I thought momentarily about my grandmother and the way that she would carry rocks and shells up from the beach in the pockets of her dresses. Then I returned, “But my mother writes here that she’s sick.” I pointed to a misshapen line.

Una took one corner of the letter and held it against the wind, “No, not sick... ‘A difficult spell,’ it says. That’s all. There’s nothing about an illness here.”

“What do you think she means by a difficult spell?”

“I don’t know. You probably know better than I.”

“But I don’t know,” I said, waiting for some answer.

“Let’s go to the beach,” was Una’s response.

Dewi walked cautiously down to the shore. Una and I followed, taking fistfuls of the ocean grass and holding it like ropes. I’d always thought that if I ever wanted to stay there all night, I could have tied myself onto the slope with thick strands of it, and made knots over the middle of my body. It would have

held my breath inside me until morning when the sun pierced the weeds over my head.

By the time we made it down to the sand, Dewi had already run ahead. I saw the dark shadow of his body moving back and forth, his nose to the ground searching.

“I think she must be sick,” I said.

“Come on, Megan.” Una swung herself away from me. “You shouldn’t take her letter so literally. She just dashed those words off is all.”

“Well, why would she write that? Why not just write about the food she ate as usual? I don’t say things unless I mean them.” I hesitated.

“Well, maybe she’s got a bit of your grandmother in her. Maybe you do too.”

“She doesn’t. I don’t either. That’s not it. I’m not imagining things. Look at the letter,” I held it up like a flag against the wild bluster of wind, my hands formed hoists on either side of it. “Do you see those symbols in the margin, all those marks like X’s and crosses everywhere?”

Una leaned over to the letter, “Those marks on the side? Maybe her pen was broken.”

“No, I think they’re intentional. They’re all perfectly formed,” I could sense something taking a hold of me. It was the same feeling I’d had when I’d stood in the chimney with my grandmother. The lines were being wrenched farther than was possible. They were stretching, but they weren’t breaking. “I think this is what she meant when she wrote that she was having a difficult

time,” I continued. I passed the letter to Una, gripping it against the squall, “Look at it yourself.”

As I handed it to her, on the crest of the very faraway horizon, at the edge of the black slab of ink in the sky, I thought I caught sight of the smallest pinpoint of fire, the flame flickering. I was doing something, but suddenly felt that I didn’t know what it was. My mother’s letter was pulled into the whirlpool of wind in a wheeling leaf. The red in the sky faded into a blue, into a white, and descended into the curve of the water as the letter struck its surface. There were lights in the night sky streaking along, aligned perfectly, too orderly and impossible to exist. I couldn’t go on with that kind of perfection. There was something haunting and terrifying about it, something impossible. It was signalling the end to everything when it should have been the beginning.

“Forget about it, Megan. It’s gone,” Una was the first to speak.

“How did it happen?” I stared in front of us.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, and she stepped towards where it had vanished under the water.

We walked to the lip of water turning in an endless attempt to escape itself. I saw the dark ocean ripples and heard the soft hum of the waves. We stood there for a long time looking at the gentle turns and the still black clouds above it in all of its beauty cracked open like a magnificent shell.

The possibility of deciphering my mother's codes was destroyed when I lost that letter on the beach—it was the last that I received from her before she arrived in Wales. I knew that it had been different from the others: there had been far more symbols in it, each one like fingers in motion, each one like a word that I didn't yet know how to pronounce. I tried to remember what they looked like, but always saw the image of the paper caught in the maw of the sea. Despite Una's solaces, I knew that something had happened to my mother.

I'd known it would happen months before, you see, just prior to my parents' departure for Korea. Even then, I'd thought that my mother was going to die a heinous death. I had forced myself to stop dreaming, because I had visions of pulling her out from under a tank, her legs mangled and wet, holding her in my lap as someone drove us through dark streets. I had dreams of watching her eyes rolling to the back of her skull. I saw her body shrivel in my

arms and her flesh melt so that she seemed no larger than an infant. I'd known that my mother would die horribly, so I'd wished for a quick death—someone to decapitate her when she was contemplating a sunset; someone to grasp her ankles and pull her down into the bottom of the sea when she was just coming up for air and could see the sun glistening down through the water in small, beaded, quivering diamonds; someone's hands to close sharply and suddenly around her throat when she was dreaming of being home with my father and me, ladling some mashed potatoes onto my plate. I had known that her death would be ugly and so I'd thought that it was essential that it be fast.

I'd wanted to tell my father that he should make sure my mother's dying lasted only a few minutes, but he was absorbed in his conversation. He was telling me that we would all be better people if he and my mother contributed to the fight against communism and prevented it from ever crossing over Canada's borders. He was explaining how positive he was that I would enjoy the experience of living with my grandparents in Wales.

It had been difficult to focus on his words. I had an ache inside my head, in my whole body. I held a blanket around me and tried to feel warm. My hand looked like it wasn't my own. It was pale and had patches of white on it like a leafy membrane. There was a tingling in my wrists, my elbows, my knees. My body had been dreaming itself into a fever. I had spent the entire week before my parents' departure lying in bed, shuddering through my death dreams. She will die, I'd wanted to say to my father. You will be miserable, you will hate yourself. But my father saw none of the panic in my eyes.

Canada had been at war for a third of my lifetime but I'd never experienced any of it, neither had the land. The grass had remained green. The roads had become worn from cold winters, not from mortar discharge. But that wasn't enough, we needed wars. Since the wars didn't come to us, we went to them. And that's where I was going, through my parents. There had never really been any question about it. My father had always believed that medical people were obliged to work in their country's wars. My mother was a nurse, so she had to go. I was their daughter, so I only got to go part way.

My father had always wanted to go to war. He told me that he didn't want to miss the excitement after he heard Prime Minister Pearson's plea on the radio for people to enlist. He kept a helmet with a huge spike on the lamp in our living room. It was from the Weimar republic and was polished leather. There was something about it that he admired, because he always looked at it and held it on the end of his arm. What had that helmet seen? Rows of soldiers marching in the morning mud. Or maybe just an officer's salon, cigars, cognac, silver utensils. I'm not sure why my father wanted to be in a war. No one else in his family had gone. I know that his father didn't pass the medical exam for the First World War. Apparently, he'd had a farming accident that resulted in a large scar along his head that looked like a bird's beak in the middle of a song. My father had missed out in going to the second war in Europe. When I was just a toddler, he had signed up, gone through the rigorous training program, persevered through long hours of work, and had been sent to Edmonton for six weeks to await notice of when he was to be sent off to France. He ended up

staying there for the duration of the war because he was the only surgeon at the hospital.

My father told me that the Korean War was a battle where communism was trying to dominate the free nations. Canada was in danger. Even though it was supposed to be World War III, we didn't know of anyone else who was going there. When neighbours or friends had come by our house, they'd just nodded at their teacups or the bitten-off edge of a cookie when my father told them that he and my mother had volunteered to work in the mobile military hospitals. There was often a kind of silence when my parents would talk about how they were learning about motor mechanics, military map reading, and army drills. Of course, people seemed proud of Canada's participation in the conflict and stamping out communism in the east. Everyone seemed to agree with Prime Minister Pearson that the communist enemies were insidious, oppressive, degrading, perverted, malicious, and diabolical. But a few had asked why my parents would volunteer when they seemed perfectly happy with their lives and jobs were so abundant. My father never talked about happiness, he talked about work.

"Measure yourself by how hard you work," he told me once while we were sitting at the kitchen table. "Set your goals impossibly high and that way, you'll be able to achieve them." He was talking about his own life probably, and not mine. It was his way of telling me he was achieving something by going to Korea, the absolute sacrifice—his own life.

My father had talked about duty, that they were making a small sacrifice if it meant that the H-bomb was never going to be dropped on Canada. He

thought he had something he could give to the Third World War that was happening in Korea, he thought I was giving to the war by agreeing to live with my grandparents.

What could he give? A clean stump at the end of an arm, a new face with a flat cheek, fresh skin to cover a shredded leg? He knew how to fix bodies that had been split apart. I didn't like to think about it. It reminded me of animals that had been hit on the highway—those sprawling shapes that rested by the side of the road. For some reason, I always imagined that they were really human bodies scattered along the highway. Bodies that had accidentally fallen out of cars, leaned too heavily on unlocked doors, or exhausted with everything, stepped out onto the asphalt.

I didn't understand how surgery worked, but I found it frightening. My father had shown me his instruments once when I went with him to the hospital. I remember seeing blades and clamps for the most part. They had the same polished metal of a filling in a tooth. He sliced the upper waxy membrane off the leaf of a plant to demonstrate how sharp they were. Afterwards he held it in front of the lamp on his desk. It looked like it had veins and a heart, an entire body seemed to be concealed within that leaf. I didn't understand why surgeons needed scalpels and clamps, especially in a war. I thought there would have been enough cutting and gouging without doing more of it. Surgery seemed like a new kind of destruction, a way of making a crooked wound straight.

I also didn't like to think about surgery because it reminded me of the very real danger that my parents were putting themselves in. My real fear was that they would come back to me in pieces. I'd be standing in Wales with the

remnants of them around me, not knowing how to put them back together. It would be like a human jigsaw puzzle, it would take hours. A spleen in one hand, a heart in another. And after I'd put them together, I'd be begging them to live, to talk, to be what I remembered them to be. Speak, I'd yell at them. Speak! It wouldn't really matter though. I wanted them to come back to me, even in pieces would be all right, but come back, come back.

Should I tell my mother? Should I blackmail her? I had thought about how I would say it. My head had felt like it was covered in mucilage, a thick, deafening membrane of sludge. I hadn't left the bed for several days. It was all I knew of my grandparents' house, of Wales. The ceiling over the bed had a few writhing bodies on it, but no one seemed to notice. They swam around the light that hung over the bed. They spat and seethed and chanted how my mother was going to die, burn, explode.

I had opened my eyes. There was my mother's face against the window with the dark summer sky forming a lake around her skin. Her eyes had been sealed, her mouth also. She seemed to be taking long gulps of air through her nose. Did she know? Why else would she be sitting there completely muted, mourning her own life?

"Mum," I'd whispered. "Don't go. Something will happen."

There, I'd said it. I was sitting up for the first time that I could remember. I'd leaned forward over my knees and had to support myself with my hands. It felt like my body's substance had been drained into the bed. It left me unsteady, unfocused. She hadn't answered. She'd kept her eyes closed. I had to

close my eyes also. My head was like a swollen seed pod that just needed to be opened.

When I'd next woken up, it was to the sound of a small animal scurrying and brushing up against the wall, touching the floorboards with its paw. What I saw when I opened my eyes wasn't an animal, it was my mother. She had a notebook on her knees, and was writing something out with a pencil.

My mother had smiled at me calmly as if nothing was going to happen. I'd wanted to smile back at her, but I'm not sure if I did or not. She'd come to the bedside then, put her arm around me and told me not to worry. I would live with my grandparents for a year and then they'd come and get me. I would grow to love Wales just like she had. The fields, chips with malt vinegar, left lane driving—there were so many things I would learn. I'd love it. Yes, I'd love it. I'd looked out the window. When my mother exploded, it would be in a vermillion eclipse, darkly blooming in every direction.

When I'd finally gotten up, I was standing in front of my grandparent's house. My parents were going to join a United Nations air convoy that would take them into the centre of the Korean War.

Thomas was behind me. My grandmother had put on a dress for my parents' departure, along with some costume jewellery—two strings of small pearls instead of the shell necklace I'd seen her wearing when we'd first arrived there. The driver was loading their duffel bags into the taxi. After hugging each other, my grandmother flinched, and grasped my mother at both elbows. It

looked like my grandmother was mouthing the words, “stay,” “don’t cross,” “ignore,” “safe,” and “closed,” and then I almost thought that I saw a hot column of steam rushing up between them.

I’d wanted to tell my mother something. I’d wanted to tell her that she would die. It would be grisly. It would be horrific. I’d thought I should tell her that I really did like the beef stew she made with the turnips, potatoes, and chunks of meat that looked like brown, hairy erasers. I should tell her it didn’t taste that bad, and I’d like it if she put down her luggage, went into my grandparents’ house right then and started to cook it. I would help.

I’d wanted to tell her how I felt. I felt like my head had been enclosed in a box and my body had been refrigerated. I was sick. I didn’t feel like myself. I knew what would happen to her. I knew all about her death. It hadn’t felt right to stand, to lie down, to talk, to be wearing my best dress and watching her coming towards me with her arms open and long lines of tears streaming down her face. I’d wanted to tell her that someone had made a mistake, that she could stop squeezing me and whispering things like I would see her soon, like they would be safe and I would love Wales, I would love it. Nervous bile rose in my throat twice. My mother gave me her ring. I was to take care of it until they returned to bring me back to Canada. I looked at the thin peach line it left on her finger.

Then she’d stopped squeezing me and my father gave me a hug. They’d gone to the taxi. Their shoes clicked on the gravel. I’d wanted to say I would go with them. I would cut my hair. I would cut myself. I’d wanted to say that I

liked pancakes on Sundays. I'd wanted to tell my father that a simple machine didn't require pulleys.

As my parents had driven away, I'd vomited through my nose on my grandmother's brown leather shoes. It made the pattern of thick raindrops. I thought my grandmother called out or maybe that was the sound of a crow cawing. I'd felt disoriented like my arms were held by the elbows. Thomas had guided me into their house and patted my shoulder while I'd leaned over the toilet seat. The toilet bowl had spurted like a new park fountain. I saw my mother's death in that toilet. I saw my mother torn apart.

I walked back from the beach alone, without Una, without my mother's letter, under the shadow of the moon. On the ground, moving in discordant shapes, forming and unforming, were the outlines of things unnamed. Shadows forged into circular drops for a single moment then broke apart. The shifting seemed transparent. In the blurred moonlight, there was recognition and elation.

Una had said that it was wicked, that I was foolish to have done such a thing, that it was incredibly and shockingly disrespectful, that it was illegal and we could have been fined if we'd been caught—maybe even arrested for being deranged, and that I was a woman now and I certainly didn't have to do what Thomas said, I certainly should have been able to judge better.

I had stood there, not knowing what to say, the indigo of her eyes had darkened. Numbed whenever she spoke to me like that, my tongue grew thick, my mouth dried. A tightness within me set itself against those words.

“They stopped doing the *gwynos* a long time ago,” Una had started again.

“My grandmother asked Thomas to do it,” I’d faltered. “She wanted to assuage any bad spirits from carrying her soul away... My grandmother had once told me that a body left alone in a room can easily be entered,” I’d added, looking for Una’s approval, yet feeling strange that I had adopted my grandmother’s voice as I was speaking.

“Megan, the Methodists campaigned against the *gwynos* almost a hundred years ago. Nobody has practised it since then,” she’d paused, letting out a long sigh.

“That’s not true,” I’d countered. “There was a *gwynos* for Merwyn Williams after she was killed.”

“Another Williams...,” Una cast her gaze over the wet sand of the beach. “She must be related to Iwan. A great aunt, I think. She died young if I remember correctly... How would you know if there was a *gwynos* for her?”

“Thomas explained the story to me—Trevor, one of the hired hands, had told him when he was a boy,” I’d answered her curtly, surprising myself.

I guess I should confess that the mention of Iwan had begun to create a rancour that solidified more and more each time I heard his name. I freely admit that he’s part of the story—but that doesn’t mean that I have to like the telling of it. Back then, the mere thought of Iwan would sear like lightning in the mush inside my chest. It would bolt through my guts like fast, burning honey. I wanted to tell Una what I knew of him, what I had known of him, and that she should call the entire thing off. But I couldn’t stay alone with that thought,

because she wanted to know more about Merwyn Williams. So I told her, starting with Trevor.

He was an avowed atheist who believed that if he was forced to walk through a boiling vat of pig's feet, he could come out unscathed—but just as long as he didn't think it was real, Thomas had explained to me. It's all in the mind, Trevor used to say to Thomas. So when he was asked to partake in the gwynnos by Merwyn Williams' father, he agreed to it right away—for the right price of course.

As for Merwyn Williams, Thomas told me, she was fine—that's what everyone thought of her. Not beautiful and charming in the typical sense. She had a way about her was what everyone said. She was better than everything, was what they said also. Not better than people, just better than the drudgery of everyday life, better than things. It was in her smile—it was so complete. She was fresh. She was light. She would walk all the way to the Rhossili market to sell onions and potatoes most days. It was five miles each way and it was often raining on the way back. The walk never bothered her, the rain never bothered her either. She had a calming effect was the way Thomas explained Merwyn Williams to me. She drove her father's work horses into Rhossili to go to the stores on the weekend. They were huge animals, but she even seemed to have a way with them. Her father would sometimes go with her when she drove. He'd be sitting back in the carriage and smiling at the way she was able to hold the reins so lightly, yet have complete control over the team. There was nothing spectacular about her on the surface. But the fact that nothing seemed to sadden her, not her father working himself to the bone in the fields, nor her mother

working as kitchen help at a fancy English house on the bay, nor even her life and those of her brothers and sisters crowded into their rented cottage, and each of them working by the time they reached ten. She looked at life like it was a happy thing. She looked at it like she wanted to live it. She wasn't capable of seeing anything bad. This is what made her so fine.

Thomas had told me that she was run over by a milk carriage one evening as she was walking home in a downpour. The carriage driver had set the horses at a gallop so that he could get home faster—his milk run had taken longer because of the pouring rain. The fog was so thick that he couldn't see past the horses' ears. And there was Merwyn walking in the middle of the road, probably thinking about what a nice day she'd had at the market, or how good the rain felt on her skin, or what kind of soup she would have for supper. Thomas told me that the horses took her down. Both wheels of the wagon rolled across her spine. Her face was crushed and embedded in the mud.

It was her father who'd wanted to have the gwynnos to ensure that her spirit remained untouched. Only her immediate family was present for it, and Trevor also—he pulled the body up the chimney. It happened two days after she died, the night that Lewis Jones had come in to pay his respects, Thomas had said.

Trevor had told Thomas that they probably had a gwynnos because earlier that evening, Lewis Jones had walked into the Williams' house wearing nothing but his thick erection, which was apparently very thick. Lewis Jones' face was streaked with light lines of tears that looked like tiger stripes. His body was splotched like a cow's from the fields. It was obvious to the mourners who had

all turned with partially-filled teacups, half-chewed bites of meat pies in their cheeks, and hushed words of condolences still hanging in the air, that not only had Lewis gone for a dip in the mud, but he'd undoubtedly dipped into Merwyn several times and had a broken heart as a result of it. If it wasn't enough to be naked and covered in mud, he took hold of his erection and walked towards the body, which was hooded and had its arms crossed stiffly over its chest. Before he got to it, he was intercepted and pushed roughly out the door, proclaiming his love for Merwyn. Everyone present realised that it must have either been love or that Merwyn had been a woman of many talents, because Lewis left the wake with his erection just as tremendous as it had been when he walked in...

So, after I'd told Merwyn's story, Una had accepted that it was possible that the gwynnos wasn't as dead as people thought it was, but she had still been incensed with me. I'm not quite sure why, but it made her frustrated enough that she'd gone directly up the cliffs from the beach. When Una was frustrated, she was more unruly than a wave when it boomed against the beach.

After watching her disappear at the top of the bluff, I walked back toward home also, back toward my grandmother who was resting quietly in her coffin. There had been a lesson learned there—I knew that I couldn't write to my parents to tell them about the gwynnos, they probably wouldn't have understood either. In fact, I knew that if Una didn't approve of it, no one would. Yet, I still didn't feel any regret about hauling her up the chimney. My grandmother had never asked for very much during the short time that I'd known her—just her insistence that I “be as I would be,” whatever she'd meant by that. She had been firm in the conviction that her spirit would remain in danger unless there was a

gwynnos, yet I never quite felt that it was her spirit that she was worried about. I'd asked Thomas if he knew why she'd wished for it, but he hadn't any idea, which was quite typical of him. He'd tramped out to the barn more than once bearing an empty suitcase, only to return with no idea what he had intended on doing. As I climbed up the cliffs, I thought that it may have had something to do with my grandmother's belief that there were dead people walking on the earth. Maybe she had been trying to ensure her safety among them through the gwynnos.

When Gwyn is coming home from town, she sees one of these dead people standing outside the house. She is still quite far away, where any figure at that distance is undefined. She is tired from her walk, and so she gives into her imagination even though she knows the shape is probably only Thomas who has just come home from sheep-rearing.

Gwyn looks at this person beside the house. It is like seeing a different self, one that is six hundred years old standing by the sea. In all that time, he has always been a still figure alone on the landscape. And he doesn't look that odd after all. Far away on the field, it is quite an interesting sight to see him caught in the wind with his shirt twisted tightly around him like a rope binding his body. There is strength in it and independence. Gwyn feels suddenly relieved for herself that she is like him, something greater than she'd thought at first—alone but dignified.

The person turns to face her. There is a moment of recognition, a tilting of his head perhaps to see if it is Gwyn. Gwyn thinks that this is a moment to remember. She is seeing her own personal ghost brought back from the past. How often does that happen, that a real mirror—a tangible and living one—is placed in front of her face and she is forced to look?

Gwyn continues to look at this ghost-person. She wonders what his life has been like—did he work in a kitchen scouring vegetables, run away from the house where he'd been in service, become a priest to escape from the cruelty in the world, or had he just gone along with everything, accepting things as they were? And if he and Gwyn speak, she wonders how her life will be affected. Will his memories become her memories, will his experiences become hers also? The flogging of the egg-stealers in the market square, the people with broken arms that have healed backwards so that it makes them look like they have wings, and the cruelty of the tithe collectors who ride through the streets with the poor tied in a long line from a rope, forcing them to run behind the horses through the mud and the shit, past the other townspeople staring. Will these become her memories also? They will, Gwyn thinks. They will have an unspoken understanding, the shared fluid of their birth, something that flows between them.

It is when Thomas comes out of the house that she thinks it is funny the way that distance alters judgement and disappearing objects are reflected against the eye. She realises she was imagining this person. There is nobody standing there with Thomas. It is only thoughts and daydreams in her subconscious.

Gwyn finds herself frozen for a moment, a frozen ghost-woman, not

knowing quite what to do. Although, she doesn't think she can be that frozen, because she is running. Frozen, running ghost-woman maybe.

It looks like Thomas is yelling and waving his hand at her. He doesn't really seem to be saying anything, "Hoy, yoi, yoi. Hah, yah, yah." And he is bending over, slapping his leg, he is laughing so hard. His hands are shaking back and forth. She can't see their tips—they are like feather-fingers. She can see his face as it gets closer to her though.

For some reason she thinks that Thomas won't recognise her. Or that he will have changed or she will have changed and they won't know how to act. But he seems just the same, with his arms outstretched to take her in. And that's how she feels when she crumbles into him. That he hasn't changed, that she's seen nothing, and thought nothing, and walked nowhere, and spoken to no one. She feels like a child, an infant even, with only her intense need to be taken back and to be held for a very long time. It's something so human that it never goes away. She has always felt it.

They stand there for a while before Thomas realises that his arms have become wet. At first, he mistakes it for the cold wind. But then he looks at Gwyn. He sees that her legs and arms are damp with seawater.

She is laughing at the questions coming out of him so quickly. Where did she go today? Why didn't she tell him where she was really going? How did she get wet? Thomas asks all these questions just as Megan comes out of the house, greeting Gwyn and telling them it is time for tea.

"I still have Megan's letters that I was supposed to post in town this afternoon," Gwyn whispers to Thomas.

He brushes her words aside, while he looks at the salt-stained hem of her skirt. He can see from the way she is leaning on him that she is tired.

“What happened to you?” Megan says, motioning at Gwyn’s legs.

“Nothing,” Gwyn answers. “Nothing.”

And there really doesn’t seem to be anything, so they walk into the house, anxious for a cup of tea.

Death, the final destroyer, had to be looked at, turned over and fondled, celebrated and honoured. Even though looking at it seemed to be harmful, I nevertheless practised it until it had been made into a refined art. Turning death into brilliance, death into some flaxen prong of luminosity that entered my body and transformed it into something far greater than it was. That morning, the light was a harbinger of death, not that of a new day. It echoed in my mind before I realised that there was another motivation for the coming day. To play with the dreams that kept recurring, and the harsh threads of light, that drove pin pricks of brightness through everything I looked upon.

It was my grandmother's funeral that morning. I would see her body no more. It was going to make her death a reality. I wished that my mother was there to ease me through the funeral. I tried to make myself think of something

else, my grandmother's words, like "there is a code encrypted within our being," and what she had done for me.



My grandmother had taught me how to have a secret personal joy.

It was a much weaker strain than her own. She had instructed me about it among other things, like the medicinal properties of drinking boiled water poured over a slice of ginger, and the extraordinary pleasures of eating salted scrod on thickly buttered toast in the mornings. She taught me how to remember the moments of my life by envisioning the things I saw. I found this new world overwhelming. I'd only ever exchanged letters with her and Thomas a couple times a year before I moved in with them, and mine had been very Canadian with weather-focussed news.

"Don't pass objects. Don't pass people without exploring them," she'd told me more than once with her pipe hanging out the side of her mouth. "Watch, look and see until you think you know something. And when you think you do, look again. This is the way to know the essence. This is a kind of secret joy."

I explored this envisioning beside the ocean on my grandparents' small rectangle of land in south Wales. It was known as Gwyn—which, oddly enough, was also my grandmother's name. It means fair and blessed, and it is, especially considering that it is one of the world's greatest secrets. The secret is this: it is the most ancient place on the earth. It was lived on before the British Isles

broke off from the rest of Europe during the retreat of the ice age glaciers. My grandmother told me that few people knew this and I should keep it mostly to myself. And I have—I'm only telling you because it became such a part of me that to perceive it is to perceive me. I came to believe that this was the reason my parents had left me there. To learn the sea, to know the countryside without a forest, to reach behind the thin membrane of my world and stretch it across this new landscape.

The Thomas ancestral house that I moved to in the summer of 1952 was a poorly designed pile of wood and rocks. Thomas had told me that our family had held tenancy there for over three hundred years. Thomas' grandfather had been unable to afford it when it came up for sale in the 1870s. He had barely been able to meet the unfair rent increases of the time, but he had vowed that the next generations would set foot on it again. Thomas himself had grown up just outside the village adjacent to the farmstead.

My grandparents had seized the opportunity to relocate after the bombardment of London. The house that they had owned in south London, where my mother had grown up, had been bombed out during the blitzkrieg. According to Thomas, only the staircase was left intact with bits of furniture strewn about it. Not long after the war, they were offered a handsome remuneration by a real estate developer for the property. They took the money, left London, and bought our ancestral farm.

I'd once looked through letters that my grandmother had written to us during the blitzkrieg. She had scrawled them almost every night from the bench where she slept at the Euston Underground. The letters, soaked in night

drippings and fungus, were spiked with intense worry and sleeplessness. They smelled like they were singed. Cannot. King George. City afire. Bright night. Thunder above. Sweaty blitzkrieg fingerprints were imprinted into the paper, as thin as an epidermis. My grandmother wrote about stumbling through blackened, bombed-out streets and huddling in Anderson shelters while the doodle-bugs screamed overhead. The city was gutted and levelled with fire bombing and flying bombs. It smouldered like a decayed lung. She complained also: "I have to sleep on a bench in the Underground while Thomas guards the family's silver and I haven't had any sugar in my tea for as long as I can remember. There's only soybean sausages, grey mashed potatoes, and mushy Brussels sprouts to eat."

It had obviously been a relief for them to relocate to Wales, even though it must undoubtedly have been a shocking change in their lives. My grandparents probably hadn't even noticed that the old ancestral home was being inhaled into the earth by its midpoint. When Thomas drove my parents and me up to it in the old wooden-panelled station wagon for the first time, it seemed to look more like a small bowl on the horizon than a house.

The real estate papers were framed on the wall in the kitchen. It was the triumph that Thomas' grandfather had dreamt of.

John Thomas

Bury Green

Gwyn

Glamorgan

Wales

Thomas had bought the property for next to nothing from Una's father, Pugh Wynn-Ellis. He hadn't actually taken care of the house, but only used the fields around it to extend his already large sheep operation. The house hadn't been officially lived in for some time. There had been a string of squatters who had settled in the place during the summer months. Pugh Wynn-Ellis had said they'd made the house into a *caban ün nos*, or a one-night cabin as Thomas later explained. It was an old custom that if a structure was lived-in for a single night and smoke was seen rising by dawn, the squatter had freehold rights to the cottage and the land around it. Pugh Wynn-Ellis had told Thomas that because of this custom, he'd turned a blind eye to the squatters. Thomas later told me that perhaps he had turned a not-so-blind eye. Pugh had told Thomas that rumour had it the squatters enjoyed the raw lash of the wind on their bare bodies and wandered about the cliffs airing themselves.

I'd nodded when Thomas told me this. He'd also told me that he was sure Pugh Wynn-Ellis didn't really mind catching sight of the nudists the odd time either. After all, Thomas had said, looking at sheep's ass holes for ten hours a day for forty years could do strange things to a man. I'd nodded, and agreed that it could do strange things to a man, but I actually had no idea what ass holes had to do with sheep.



Thomas finally had to get me up the morning of my grandmother's funeral. He said that the sheep were going to fall off the cliffs into the sea if I didn't herd them back onto the heath.

He went ahead to feed the pigs and chickens, after trying to wind his lower lip into a smile. Before he did though, he said what he always did before going out to see the animals, something like: "We'll have no more Canadian bacon, Megan. It'll be only pure Welsh stock... Maybe we can even try making our own Caerphilly cheese... Nothing but the best Welsh lamb for us. Imagine...mutton from our own farm"—or something like that. Then he walked away, not even waiting for a response from me, but instead saying something about how corn would probably even take on the land.

I went into the kitchen without looking in on my grandmother, took a piece of toast from the stack that was lying cold on the plate like the pile of my mother's letters beside it, and walked to the barn on the field just behind the house to look for the herding switch. Compared to the bowl-like house, the barn looked more like a fat slab of cheese or even a swollen sheep's udder. It had avoided being pulled into the land, probably because it was set back from the sea. There was a large pen around one side of it. The pen was made of small stones piled on top of one another and held into the shape of a fence with broad wooden posts and barbed wire. On some of the barbs were tufts of sheep's wool.

I walked into the barn. It looked much smaller from the inside, but then everything looks smaller from the inside—a house, a life, a country. It was probably because the barn had two storeys. The lower one was only a dirt floor.

The sheep shared that space with bales of hay and a lot of clutter. I couldn't find the sheep switch, so I took the ladder that led to the second floor loft. Each rung had been worn into a wavy snake from the rub of hands and feet.

The second floor covered only half the area of the bottom. There were two wooden platform beds to one side of the loft and a gaping hole opposite it. It wasn't actually supposed to be a hole, but a window. Two windows actually, the tops of them were arched like an owl's furrowed brow staring at something. The something was the view—the land leading to the ocean and the sun burning silver onto its surface.

"London was filled with gaping holes where buildings once stood," my grandmother had said just a week before to the space between us after a particularly long pipe puff. I hadn't known what to say back to her or what to do in response. Her war talk always disturbed me, because it set my imagination off worrying for my parents. So I said nothing. It didn't seem to matter though, she continued, "Fragments of blackout curtains fluttered from what were once windows, clouds of dust swirled along the unwashed streets. I tried to ignore it. I brushed the plaster dust out of my hair and started sweeping out our neighbour's living-room." Then suddenly she looked at me and said, "Why are you looking at me like that? What's wrong, Megan? Don't... Don't worry about your old grandmother, life goes on."

While I reached for the switch that I'd noticed in a corner of the loft, I tried to think of something else. I wondered who had lived in the barn. Thomas had told me it had probably been the farmers' servants. It was difficult to imagine the conditions of always having to live with the sweet smell of dung

before going to sleep, to feel the warmth from the sheep below as their heat rose through the barn to the loft. But perhaps one thing would have saved these sheep people—the view, the silver wash of water. The desperation in their lives would have evaporated when they looked out and watched the sea and the cloudy sky. Ocean dreamers and sky watchers.

How many people had lived there? It was impossible to know. Thomas said that half a dozen could fit in those beds and even one more if it was necessary. I had told him that it seemed like a strange life.

“Yes, but at least they had the freedom to roam the countryside looking for maidservants,” Thomas had told me.

“What for?” I’d asked.

“You know,” Thomas had wheezed. “So they could sit up all night courting in the kitchen or even bundle in bed if they were lucky.”

“What’s bundling?” I asked him.

“You know,” he’d answered, looking suddenly worried, wiping his forehead.

But he needn’t have been worried. I’d already experienced bundling, or something like it.



“I was so tired. I was too tired to feel anything,” my grandmother had said another time while the three of us sat at the table trying to digest a heavy breakfast of fried toast and sausages. I’d listened, but had tried not to look in

her direction. “Everything was in short supply. Leather for shoes even—many people wore wooden-soled shoes. We had to wait in queues for everything from fish to newspaper. If we asked for steak we got horsemeat. We had to queue up for bunks in tube stations, and carry our own bedding. But I refused to sleep a few feet from the trains, under the feet of passers-by. I refused, didn’t I, Thomas? I’d wait up all night instead of doing that. Thomas would get me tea from the canteen at the end of the platform, wouldn’t you, Thomas?”

Thomas had patted her arm tenderly as her gaze wavered off into the past. Then she’d startled me when, as an afterthought she’d said, “I wonder how your parents are doing. I wrote your mother a letter, but she hasn’t written me back.”

With a glance in my direction, Thomas interjected, “I’m sure they’re just fine. I’m sure they’re busy.”

I’d had to block out my grandmother’s stories. I had known that it was a mistake. She had been talking to me all along, because she needed something. Maybe it was confirmation that I understood. But I hadn’t wanted to understand. I hadn’t wanted to think about it, nor about my parents who were living in buildings that looked like centipede bodies. What saved them as they worked inside those brown, corrugated iron domes? Letters from me. My worry scratches. Were my letters enough to save them? Or maybe I was saving myself by writing them. The very existence of a letter after it was newly written made me believe that my parents would be safe until they received it.

And I would always get proof that they were safe. In exchange, my father sent me letters describing Nissen huts. He wrote that all the buildings were made

of iron domes that had been positioned over concrete floors. They had different ones to work in, eat in, sleep in. Most didn't have windows. My father wrote that his favourite breakfast was instant scrambled eggs, hominy grits and sausages, while my mother's was oatmeal. He liked eating out of mess tins. He liked playing Ping-Pong when he had free time. They would also send me lists: "Please arrange a package to send us, we need a few things—biscuits, cake, jam, tea, tinned milk, toiletries." And then my mother would always add other things at the end of the list like silk stockings or Elizabeth Arden lipstick.

I mostly wrote what I'd seen. The unrelenting rain, pine trees that had fat nuts hanging off of them, the long green fields with stone fences running like veins through the countryside. And the sea. I'd never seen the sea before. The long stretch of waves never stopped fluttering like the throats of newborn birds never stopped gulping and gulping when they reached for food. I wrote them about my grandparents, how they'd become special people for me. And about my grandmother who was teaching me to learn the ocean through long walks, to learn the wind by standing on the cliff and letting it blow into my eyes.



I never wrote to my parents that I couldn't be a surgeon like my father, and that I probably couldn't be a nurse like my mother. The sight of blood, other than my own, made me sick. It made me think of my parents covered in it to their elbows. Blood gloves. It made me think about the fragile bodies that were brought in from the fighting to be mended. Bodies begging for their mothers to

take them up again, to enfold them and clasp them closely and warmly. Bodies that were the same as my own.

As I walked around the barn toward the cliff with the sheep switch in my hand, I was thinking about my grandmother's stories of London. How I could have gone inside them, understood that space in her mind, and relived with her the endless numbers of bombs.

Then it dropped down to the ground, a little ball of flesh falling right in front of my eyes. It looked like it was four days old. A little bird. Its beak shuddered. I leaned over it. What should I do? It would never be accepted back into the nest if I touched it. What choice did I have? I lifted it by the space just behind either wing. Its body was warm. Its beak was open. There was resistance. A small sound, so subtle, like batter being folded in a bowl—but just once. I lifted. There were two small rusty tacks where it had been lying. I turned the bird and saw two tiny holes in the soft skin of its back. Its blood was thin and it dribbled like the tiny drops melting off the end of an icicle in the spring. I left it there and walked toward the cliffs. I ran toward them with my hands held ahead of me. I could see that their tips were red. I started to run faster. I hoped that my grandmother didn't know what I was thinking. It didn't make sense, but it was real. I was thinking that if I had listened to her stories she'd still be alive.

Gwyn watches the glimmer dotting upwards in subtle licks like liquid gems, seething in diaphanous waves, writhing in thin gossamer. In the centre of the flames, it looks like there are small nymphs with pointed toes and fingers. Their escape is new and they still wear the straps and manacles that used to bind them. Some of their bodies are bent backwards in unthinkable positions. Oh, to join them and feel that sweet erection as it spreads throughout the body. A climb into the fire is the first movement toward a true departure. The temptation is strong. It calls and beckons for an emptying of memory and the leaving of all consciousness behind. Dive in and leave the self behind, hear its last whisper, leave it behind.

Gwyn, sitting on the edge of her chair, is staring at the oil lamp on the table, as Thomas helps himself into the chair next to her. Megan brings her tea in a small cup along with a bowl filled with rough diamonds of sugar. Gwyn's

legs still wear a red blush from the bath she has just had. It is also the colour of her hands and wrists. Underneath Gwyn's jumper, she senses that her body is delicate, that it is wrapped in gauze, that it is resisting.

"I got lost in the rain," she tells Thomas and Megan. Thomas pokes at one of the logs in the fireplace. Red cinders spray upward like droplets of burning hot water.

The showers had come when she was walking to town, Gwyn tells them. There had been thick membranes of it. She thought that she had seen other people ahead of her, grabbing onto the grass at the side of the road. The rain had pushed her into a meandering path, a deep gully that cut away from the road. She tells Thomas and Megan that she hadn't noticed at first and had walked along in the rain feeling her way through the brush, trying to follow whoever it was who was ahead of her. Her feet were getting wetter and wetter with each step. Moving forward seemed like a new operation that she was undertaking for the first time. Much later, when the fog and the rain had cleared, she was still wandering about the same place, just off the road, and it was time to go home.

Megan watches Gwyn talking as she sits beside her. Letters from Jane and Graeme sit on the windowsill—Graeme's content, Jane's simpering, wanting to be read again. Gwyn cradles a cup of tea in one hand and holds onto the nub of her pipe with the other. Megan says that Gwyn should rest. She must be tired. She should just let herself fall asleep, and forget about the confusion of the day.

Megan looks at her grandmother and imagines her, in frozen quandary and bewilderment, caught in the rain. She sees her grandmother standing to the

side of the road, an old woman unable to make sense of the thick downpour.

The water would have made the air moist so that she may almost have been able to tug it down around her like a coat with large billowing pockets. Megan thinks of her poor grandmother imagining that she sees other people ahead of her, and telling herself to follow them. What her grandmother must have seen was a thin stream of flowing shadows from the dense rain.

But when Megan brings her grandmother more into focus, as she is now, sitting and drinking her tea, she doesn't look like she could ever have gotten lost or that she could have wandered off along a path in search of imagined people. She looks strong and young despite her grey hair and wrinkles, especially in the way she is talking to Thomas, nodding at a story he is telling about feeding the pigs. She is a lot like me, Megan thinks, she likes to listen more than she likes to talk. Megan supposes that Thomas had once enjoyed listening like that also, but like he said, farming can do strange things to a man and sheep are known for many things, but their conversational skills are not one of them.

Gwyn stands up. She wants to go to the beach right this moment. She must do something. It seems difficult for her to walk, but she says that she does not want any help. Megan had wanted to give her help. She had wanted Gwyn to take her by the shoulder so that she could lead her over to the thick grass by the cliff. Megan feels the need to do something for Gwyn or to let her know that she is not alone, that she is loved. Instead, Megan is left there watching her grandmother take each step very slowly. It is not really a struggle—each pace is taken firmly on the ground. It just seems like she is moving in her own time.

Gwyn feels like she is an actor, acting like an old woman. Thomas and Megan are her audience.

A few minutes later, Thomas and Megan are walking to the cliff backwards while Gwyn is walking forwards facing them. Thomas has asked Megan to do this, so he can roll a cigarette on the way there.

“There’s nothing like the sharp stab of tobacco in the lungs to make you feel alive,” he tells her, as he rolls a cigarette through his fingers into a tight nail.

He makes two cigarettes in the little corner that they have made with their bodies. None of them speak because the wind is strong. They can feel it pressing on their bodies like a brawny hand pushing them away from the cliff. At the same time, Gwyn seems to be pushing Thomas and Megan toward the cliff because they only take a step forward when she does.

She looks up then and smiles. Megan smiles back at her. I saw the beginnings of it in your mother, Gwyn thinks, as she looks at Megan. Your mother had the beginnings. I hope that you will not find it. I want to be sure that you do not find it. Stay away and secreted. But Gwyn cannot hold her gaze on Megan for very long. It shifts just to the side and is pulled over the water. Gwyn thinks about how very similar she actually is to the water. It is like she is looking at herself when she sees the water.

“I’ll go ahead on my own,” Gwyn says to them at the edge of the cliff, even though she is still walking hesitantly.

“But we can take you down to the beach,” Thomas coughs as he reaches out and takes hold of her wrist. It feels like cold steel and he almost lets go of it

for a moment because he is so surprised. “You’ll get sick if you continue on in this way,” Thomas says in a low tone continuing his protest.

Gwyn knows that it is true, but all she can do is look at the water as she leans against Megan. She does not know what they see when they look at it, but what she sees is everything.

“I’ll be able to go on my own just fine, Thomas. Once I’m done there, I’ll come right back up. I’ll just take a few minutes.”

She releases the hold she has on Megan’s shoulder and walks down the grassy hillside. Thomas stands ahead of Megan, blowing smoke, and not noticing how it is drifting back into her face. The push of the air is hard. Gwyn manages to move out onto the bluff. She links her thumb into the nub of fur behind Dewi’s head and holds him close to her. It is like they are one large person.

“A few minutes,” she calls back at them as her head disappears down the sloping cliff. Thomas blows a small puff of smoke down to where her head had been. It rises upwards taking on a new shape with arches and tufts.

Gwyn guesses that she would describe this feeling as happiness. The evening light is glaring off the surface of the water. The waves are shifting in every direction. Her skin is being filled with the red beams of the sunset. She had really wanted to go down to the beach alone. Among those people who she had seen, there had been one who had motioned her by opening his hand and winding his long fingers through the fog. There had been periwinkles balanced in his palm. He had seemed different from the others because of that. The shells must have meant something. That was the reason Gwyn had allowed herself to

be lead off the road that day. She had felt young again, it was like her ageing was beginning to be reversed. She could be a child once more.

Dewi is running around in circles and zigzags along the beach, obsessed with escape from his own long shadows. He looks slightly similar to Gwyn who has reached the beach and is weaving a thin line along the sand with her head pointed down at it. She is looking for shells.

“You’ll be able to have all that you want. You’ll be able to see the ocean when you look at them,” Gwyn says as she picks up a shell, rubs the sand off with her thumb, and then slips it into the pocket of her skirt. “When the shells get old and broken, you can come back here and more will be waiting.”

She kneels down in front of an involute shell covered in sand, and reaches out to see if it would make a good part of her offering. It disappears when she touches it and becomes a smudge where her finger had pressed. The evening sun has tricked her. It is only the wet imprint of one that had been pressed into the sand and then somehow perfectly removed. But the imprint is clear and detailed, almost like it is a real shell.

“This one’ll do also,” Gwyn says. The inside looks like blue marble. She passes it into the pocket of her skirt, and then looks into the palm of her hand.

Gwyn turns around and waves at Thomas and Megan. They both signal for her to come back up from the beach. She knows that it is time, but she is not ready yet. She needs to prepare some kind of sign that can be seen from a distance, and have meaning when it is stared at directly. She looks on the ground, littered with broken spines of shells, rounded stones, and tattered sticks of driftwood, buried or splayed or tossed onto the beach. She sees something

there, a shape. It does not emerge at first—she has to move further away from it still with her head tilted just slightly—but it is there within the half destroyed shells and wood that were at one time lost on the sea and then brought back to the coast of Wales. Gwyn looks at that place and memorises it from where she is staring. The shape is just beyond her knowing, just beyond what she thinks she is trying to say. She is not sure what it may mean from the dead people's perspective, there does not seem to be anything spectacular about it. It is not like the water near the horizon that seems to be burning with a blue sun. It is like a thick and dark mass full of shadows. But Gwyn supposes, while she looks back up at Thomas and Megan on the cliff and then down at the water in front of her, that those people can see something that she cannot. Perhaps the sun looks like it is dusting the tips of the waves from where they appear, perhaps they can see something beautiful that Gwyn cannot, perhaps they think that the black water is beautiful, that the light shining on it is like small white emeralds, that the sky is made of viscous bands of colour when it is really just a dun-coloured juice now that the sun is setting. Just then, she sees that the moon of that early evening makes a long bar of light all the way onto the beach.

Megan is quite bored by the time her grandmother starts to make her journey up the edge of the cliff with her arms laden down with driftwood. So bored is Megan, in fact, that she has decided to try her first cigarette. Thomas, glowing over the news that Megan is finally going to try smoking, takes the time to roll what he considers a very ladylike fag—that is, one where the tobacco is very tightly packed and the shaft of the smoke very slim and almost refined. He

lights it for her himself, explaining that she has to suck on it hard to make sure that it is lit.

“How do you like the taste of your first fag?” Thomas asks her while casually sucking on his own.

“Well, my head is spinning quite a bit, but I like the way it feels between my fingers.” She coughs.

Truthfully, Megan finds that it brings her to a more beautiful place. She enjoys the hard force of something pushing outwards from inside her. It makes her feel ready to go somewhere. It is like the sudden and recent pressure she has felt from falling in love, the movement of the hinge in the front of her chest, the room that expands inside her, and the feelings of excitement carved out. There are other things that this fag makes her feel also, like maturity and adulthood. She must look good with a fag between her fingers. She must look desirable, self-confident, noticeable, striking even. Smoking a fag is like fresh fruit, or a lush garden with birds taking baths and cicadas squealing through a hot night.

They both stand there, puffing, waiting for Gwyn who is supposed to return any minute according to Thomas. But it takes another round of fags before, first Dewi, and then Gwyn with her arms sagging, laden by long sticks of wood, appear. The wood is sea-worn and rubbed with holes and knots with long fingers of seaweed extending out of it. Gwyn immediately goes to work on it.

“Because it is possible,” Gwyn answers Thomas when he asks what she is doing standing the wood up like that.

“Whatever you want, my Love,” he says and seats himself down. “You’ll excuse me if I don’t help, but I’m knackered.”

Megan stands to the side, not quite knowing what to do. Gwyn has positioned a piece of driftwood vertically against the ground where they were waiting for her. With her hands taking a firm hold of it from the top, she is pushing her weight onto it in an effort to force it into the ground. The length of wood stands, impaled in the earth, looking like it just fell out of the sky. Gwyn continues, while Megan looks on, also seated now, her head resting against her legs.

From the way that Gwyn saw the shape on the beach, she is only required to place about four pieces of wood in this way, but she decides a longer row of six or seven pieces will make it more visible.

“What’s for supper?” Thomas asks uninterestedly, as if he has watched Gwyn doing this on every field by the cliffs.

“I thought about making some rarebit. Do we have any cheese in the icebox?” Gwyn replies without looking up. She has just finished placing her second piece of wood, and thinks how lucky she is that it slid directly into the ground with very little effort.

“No idea,” Thomas replies. He is now lying down on his back, looking up into the sky with his arms crossed.

“I’ll see about it after I’m finished here,” Gwyn says as she pushes in the third piece of wood. She knows better than to ask Thomas to start on dinner. In theory he knows about cooking, but the fumes from the pies he has come up with in the past have almost destroyed their home with toxic smells, and also created grey stains on the walls that have never gone away despite hours of scrubbing.

The remaining pieces of wood are harder to force into the ground, and she feels the strain course through her arms. But one thing that she really hates is appearing incapable, and so she refuses Megan's help, feigning that she is not tired.

Finally, all six pieces of the wood are pointing upwards in a row. It is just a slight likening to the form she saw on the beach. Reaching into her pockets, she pulls out a handful of shells and arranges them in a flat cone in front of one of the pieces of wood. It is finished only just then. Together it has meaning although some of the pieces are long, short, or crooked. Gwyn knows that it is an offering that not just anybody can read, that will not operate on just anyone's mind. She trusts that the people will be able to see it, those other selves that are wandering somewhere, whose shadows she thought she saw today. Gwyn thinks that it is a signal, an awkward one though. But will it work? Will it stay there on the green cloth of the cliff's abdomen, waiting and making meaning? Will it be seen? Will it be felt?

"You're shaking. I think it's time to go inside," Megan says.

"It is possible," Gwyn says, looking at the pieces of wood sprouting out of the earth like trumpets.

"I think we're going to have to leave this comfortable room that you've made for us and go inside for a little warmth," Megan says.

"Coming. Possible," Gwyn murmurs, allowing Megan the consolation of taking her arm, feeling suddenly lulled. Thomas follows them from behind, sleepily.

Six pieces of wood for the six times that she has seen the people. Each one is a figure of them. It is a still of the people in wood. There will be red about it also, shown through the reflections of the sunset. Yes, it really is a kind of signal, an indication that Gwyn knows.

“I’m waiting,” Gwyn says out loud, causing Megan to look around the darkening field.

Megan opens her eyes larger in the dim to try to see the expression on her grandmother’s face.

As we started the drive to my grandmother's funeral, I noticed one of her figures by the side of the road. It stood alone before a cliff. This one may have had some sort of a head in the form of shells wrapped in an onion bag, somehow fastened and hanging to the top of the stick.

My grandmother's body went ahead of us in Pugh Wynn-Ellis' estate car. Thomas and I followed in his old station wagon. Behind, were our neighbours, the Williams, the Pritchards, the Evans, the Matthews, the Edwards, and the Jones, among others.

That morning's rain had started to fall down in loud whispers. I lost my view of the back of my grandmother's car as it coasted down and out of muddy ruts, past stone farmhouses almost lost in the mild wetness. Our car was equally unbalanced by the slippery roads, rising up and down like a buoy, tossing back and forth.

Neither of us talked about the gwynnos. Thomas was imbued with grief over the death of my grandmother—it fell out of his jacket pockets, ran off his forehead, and made nicotine stains between his fingers. We were accomplices in grief, he and I, except mine had become engraved into me and his had flowed out of him. The story of my grief was the story of betrayal. The story of Thomas' grief was the story of love, I suppose. Which is greater? I would say neither since the deepest grief is still that of the dead body, our own body.

I suppose Thomas helped me in a way. Not that it helped to know that he felt grief. But it helped to know that grief comes in other forms than torn memories and ripped regrets. My grief was born the first time I witnessed my grandmother building one of her statues by the Welsh beach. I knew that it couldn't have been a custom of that country. Glamorgan was a place where accomplishment was measured by the height of a manure pile, and the amount of wool sheared in a day. Only half a century before, people had lived with their livestock. Children had fallen asleep to the steady wheezing of tired piglets. I hadn't seen any other statues across the landscape, people didn't rush down to the beach at night to collect wood and shells. The first time that I'd witnessed my grandmother's strange custom, I'd somehow managed to extend my gaze just above her figures. I started to push them out of my head when I noticed that a pile of statues had begun to surround the house in a hood. It was the same way that I dealt with her nonsense talk—"stay enclosed within a hardened shell"—by ignoring it. Thomas hadn't seemed to notice that anything unusual was happening. Neither did our neighbours, who only ever came by in the evening. I didn't even tell Una about them.

On the way to the funeral, I'd seen that Una, as a kind of nanny, was riding behind us with Owen and the twins. Her parents must have gone in another car. Iwan was with some other Williams. She had looked at me for only a moment through the pouring rain, and even for that short time, I could tell that she was taken by propriety and was playing out the old rules. She wasn't with Iwan, but she wasn't with me either.

I thought of him in the classroom, how I was mistaken the first time that I saw him up there teaching. That was back when I only knew him as Mr Williams, when I first arrived in Wales in the early summer and he was my English teacher. The youngest teacher I'd ever had. I thought he was so progressive because he was teaching us the English poets by not simply studying them, but by feeling them in our throats, by reading them aloud. And when I stood up to read I had to force myself not to watch him from under the shadow of my eyes. He had seemed so formidable, standing there with his arms crossed in his brown jacket and that half-sowll-half-smile that he sometimes wore on the edge of his lips that I wasn't quite sure I liked. But I was compelled to look on it anyhow, and him. He had been unshaved that day and his hair was tousled. And the one time that I had looked up at him, not breaking the steady beat of the words my voice spoke, I caught what I thought was some white in his eyes, the edge of something—yes, he had been looking at me, but not looking at my face. Looking at some other part of me, down the front of my dress. He turned something in me at that moment. It was something strong, a burning. And he was so complimentary after I finished reading, pressing me with praise about my Canadian accent. I hadn't any idea that the school had a mandate to erase the

Welsh accent from its pupils even though Welsh was one of the oldest living languages in Europe, far older than English. He instructed the other students that they should follow my example, that they should speak and not sing—singing was for choir practice. But he was so wrong. A Welsh accent creates an amazing transformation—it actually makes English sound musical. Listening to English is like listening to the empty droning of wet cows after they’ve spent three days in the rain. It is the sound of a long drawn-out monotone. Imagine English as symphony, English as flute solo, English as violin concerto. This was the English that they were instructed not to speak. But it really was more than that—they were being taught how to erase themselves. A body without its real voice is not a body.

It was when we were approaching the hill near the church that Thomas became filled with more grief and regret, and started crying and calling out to my grandmother, “Gwyn, Gwyn,” as if she was going to answer him. He told me that it had to do with the thirty years that he’d spent with her—he couldn’t remember it. I told him not to worry, and rested my hand on his dusty suit jacket arm. I said that it was only part of the mourning process, a sealing of the brain cavity, an indication that he cared for her. He said that hours had passed without anything coming up—where had they gone on their honeymoon; what had my grandmother’s body looked like (outside of a chimney that is); what did she like to eat for Sunday evening dinners, beef or chicken? He told me that it was like a hand trying to grasp a slippery teat. Each time it was squeezed, the hand slipped down its surface.

Thomas asked me to help him remember her before we reached the church. He wanted me to talk about my mother as we were driving up the hill, and as soon as we saw the church, he would start to talk about my grandmother. My turn first.

I didn't want to talk about my mother, because all I could think about were the letters she'd sent me clawed with symbols in ink, so I decided to talk about my father instead. My father's hair looked like short white and black wires. They had only emerged after his forty-second birthday. He liked flute music, especially that of a lone flute echoing against itself. He loved to listen to Wayne and Shuster on CBC radio while rolling his fountain pen between his fingers. He liked the English accents of the announcers. His favourite room in the house was the living room, but he liked it to look like it was never lived in. In fact, he preferred it when the entire house looked sparse and orderly. His favourite meal was roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, especially on Sundays. His father had been a real estate salesman, and his mother had raised peacocks on the farm where he grew up. He was tall and pushed his weight downward from his shoulders, which were usually slumped. It was difficult to tell when he was joking, because he looked serious even when he was being funny. He often pulled at his left earlobe when he was reading. The palms of his hands were thick, his feet were surprisingly small, and his legs were long. He dressed formally, wearing a tie even on his days off. His brown leather shoes were always buffed. He was a surgeon, but had wanted to be a soldier instead. He studied medicine at McGill University in Montreal. He joined the army so that he could get a rank of some distinction. He drove an old Studebaker Champion. He

thought it was his duty to save the world from communism. He thought that anyone could be successful as long as they worked and worked and worked. Whenever he spoke, he always had to turn something around in his hands whether it was a cork from a wine bottle, or a cigarette. He liked using the word “fatuous.” His name was Graeme.

The church appeared on the spine of the hill. I paused and waited for Thomas to tell me about my grandmother. He hung his lower lip open and took mouthful after mouthful of air. He hadn’t said anything by the time I saw the worn stone of the church. It was obvious that he was groping for a memory, but couldn’t find any. That only made him grieve all the more. Without memory, there is no reason to fall asleep at night, no reason to dream, no reason to sift through events looking for stones, looking back into the past. To fall asleep without a past is to wake up the next day, and find oneself branded with an O—the round shape of an alert eye seeking that which it had known, or of a mouth waiting to speak the words that it used to have on its tongue.

I stayed in the car as they took my grandmother’s coffin out. It was all unreal. I vaguely remember seeing Claire, Rebecca, Anne, Richard, Andrew—people in my class at school. When I look back and try to remember that time, I still feel that I wasn’t quite there. Most of the time was spent shuddering. My body felt damp, and the air smelled of the cups of rain that had been poured over the land. I vaguely remember them taking out my grandmother’s casket, each man holding onto the leather handles that ran outside it. In the brief time it took to walk in, I felt like I was floating after her. I tried to smile at the people

who nodded to me, but the smile only happened deeply in the bottom of my throat.

When I walked into the church, it felt soulless, and I knew that it had been right to have the gwylnos the evening before—my grandmother's spirit would have been trapped in that church. I sat down in a front pew, and looked up at the ceiling. After praying and singing about things like walking with lambs, eating bodies, drinking blood, and living in heaven, different people got up to speak about memories they had of my grandmother. The first was Vala Pritchard, who gave a brief history of my grandmother's smoking habits.

Vala said that everyone associated Gwyn Thomas with the pipe that she held out of the side of her mouth, and that Gwyn seemed to enjoy talking while it bobbed and nodded in agreement with every word she spoke. Perhaps, Vala suggested in a hoarse whisper that was barely audible, the pipe was the only thing that agreed with her because Gwyn had always had her own unique way of doing things. Vala stiffened for a moment, looked at my grandmother's coffin, and continued. She then talked about how Gwyn used a silver pipe that had come from Morocco, and how she would admire it while she smoked, or rub the edge of her thumb along the delicate carved lines on its surface. When Gwyn inhaled, Vala said as she tried to imitate her, it was long and deep like she was attempting to inhale the silver itself and coat her lungs with its majesty.

Just at that moment, Vala broke off her story, and stepped down from the pulpit. She patted Thomas on the shoulder as she walked by. I looked at the crumbling plaster wall in front of us, it was patterned with uneven lumps and crevices, and there was even the imprint of a hand in it. A slight chattering rose

from the back about who was to do the next talk. Then there was silence. The church became filled with the sound of the ticking clock that was on the wall near where the choir would have been if there was one.

So I listened and saw my grandmother running barefoot through a muddy field carrying chicken wire under her arm. Her feet were tender and bruised from walking on the gravel road and the dry grass in the ditch beside it. Each of her footprints became water-filled and made small ponds across the landscape. I had come home from school and was watching her from the house, because I didn't know what she could possibly be doing. My grandmother had acted like everything she did made sense to her, she had a way of doing things as if she was told what to do and she did it. Yet, it wasn't that so much as being told how to do something. It was as if she had instructions on how to dress for a certain occasion—without shoes, how to act—in secrecy, how to sit—on the edge of her chair, how to speak—repetitively. But she had seemed happy. She had begun to wear a smile on her face. Sometimes I could see that she had been trying to contain it but couldn't, and would release a small grin. I worried about how the next person at her funeral would describe her. I hoped that they wouldn't say that she was like a cracked walnut without any meat inside.

Evan Edwards was the next speaker to make his way up to the front. It took some time for him to get there because he'd gotten an injury in his patella from a farming accident, and had to walk with two canes. Evan Edwards started talking about how he guessed that my grandmother had been beautiful when she was young—not that she hadn't been beautiful last week or last year he added, raising his hands and waving them back and forth in an attempt to erase what

he'd just said. But he guessed that she was a very attractive woman when she'd been younger, he asserted, nodding at my grandfather. Evan Edwards said that he saw remnants of beauty in my grandmother—her features were as straight as her back, her eyes were very dark. And she looked strong, he added, raising his fist in the air. There was a rectangularity to her body and she still had a full head of hair at the time that she'd passed away—not that there was any reason for her not to have hair anymore, he shrugged in apology, this time to me. That was it, he continued. People held a common attraction to her that came on suddenly and sent blood singing through their veins. Gwyn Thomas had something very unusual in the way she seemed to hold court with her presence. Spending an hour with Gwyn Thomas was something like seeing a new kind of beauty for the very first time. Even the way she walked in her Wellingtons made them look different on her feet. Indeed, Evan Edwards slammed the pulpit, one felt a kind of sadness or loss when walking away from her. One was left standing there, wanting to see her again, wanting to step back to her. But such was the mystery of Gwyn, when she would be off, she'd be spinning towards someone or something else, astounding people with the charm that followed her everywhere. Imagining her was our only condolence, to stamp her firmly upon the mind was what we all had to do.

There were a few sniffles from the pews behind us. Evan Edwards nodded at Thomas as he made his way slowly by us. I thought of my grandmother in her Wellingtons. I felt like I hadn't had enough time with her either, or rather, that I hadn't spent the time I had with her wisely. She had left

early her last morning, long before Thomas would have rapped at my door, and the shade of my dreams would have been teased out me.

Instead of spending evenings talking with her, I'd spent it with a newspaper, flicking the edge of the main section while her smoke rose from behind it. I'd tried not to get distracted from my homework by listening to her stories as they were tapped out on the end of her pipe. But I somehow knew that they were precise, taking stock of every second. Nothing would pass her by, not even the figure on the face of the grandfather clock, which she told me, hid behind the minute hand to avoid the perpetual counting. But I wouldn't listen because she was taken with things that I couldn't see. It was her nonsense talk, but I hadn't differentiated between that and what I should have heard.

"It was the Little Blitz that really exhausted me," my grandmother had said one time while she looked into the full, blushing face of the grandfather clock. "All those alerts at night. Then hearing the doodlebugs' motors put-put-put, and then whistle as they came down, hearing that buzz. Seeing them also. They looked like planes flying low with fire coming from their tails. It was when they came too close that I couldn't stand it. It was like an express train at high speed. The motor would cut out just before they hit. When they hit—and they could hit anything—everything heaved up, houses swayed, showers of glass and rubble came down. They could slash a person beyond recognition. I still remember the nightmares I had, and waking up to flashes of light and sounds of explosions. I remember how strangely quiet London was other than the sounds of the bombs."

She was either surreal or too real. The stories of the Blitz didn't seem like they had been possible. For some reason, some misfortune, I hadn't had the will to fight through these memories with her. I could have helped her. I didn't. Was the only thing that was left for her the building of figures?

She had talked about the war when they'd lost their home and had to sleep in the stinking Underground with layers and layers of people. My grandmother hadn't insisted that I listen. I took the option to dislocate her words, to refuse them. She had told me that since the war, things were more expensive, and they needed more money to buy the same items. But, she'd added through smoke puffs, that what they made was enough—they were only trying to make a livelihood, nothing more. She preferred Thomas' sheep-rearing and her vegetable garden to having employment in the city, even though Thomas had found that the small West End office where he had worked had been satisfactory. She told me that she thought he had done well considering he'd started as a lad in a draper's shop.

Where else had my mind been batting about? Matters that had been splashed from my dreams, the gristle left on the end of a day after it was almost over, working through the pull of the troubles in my own closet, and somehow scattering my thoughts around the house. But of course this was only peripheral, a way of burying the real issue. The real issue was that I was in love, really in love. It was something that had stopped and changed me. It had altered the passing of time so that looking at anything, like looking at my grandmother for one slow moment, looking around the edges of her mouth, particularly before she picked up the utensils to eat dinner, would take me hours. Somehow, I could

see the love that I felt anywhere. I could see it in the cracks around my grandmother's lips when her mouth was poised to bite. It was strange, like some kind of words criss-crossed all around her face. The name of my lover perhaps.

The last speaker at my grandmother's funeral was already up at the pulpit in the dim of the afternoon light. It was Owen Matthews, the postmaster. I tried to avoid looking up at him and bit down slightly on my lip. I didn't want people to glance at me when they spoke, thinking what I may have been feeling, trying to sense what I was chewing on. I was chewing on my insufficiencies—I'd betrayed my grandmother by not working through the creases in her words, and the tightness of her voice.

Gwyn Thomas, Owen said. There was another patient silence before Owen continued. He sometimes hesitated like that in the very centre of a thought even though he was still quite young. He'd done it several times when I'd gone to post packages for my parents. He spent the entire war at various fronts. His eyes were still red from lack of sleep. He often had to blink at a piece of paper if he was going to write on it even if it was directly in front of him. He once told me about it while I waited. His eyes couldn't seem to focus anymore, he said. It was because of the war. That's also what he chose to focus on in his conversation with my grandmother. And it was a conversation. He addressed her directly, looking at where her body lay, patterning his speech by addressing her by name. As he spoke, the flower arrangement on her coffin become long slashes of oranges, blues, and purples that looked like shreds and blasts of light illuminating us all. Beyond that, the rest of the church was dark, discharged of colour. You were a brave woman, Owen Matthews addressed my

grandmother. You spent long nights in London running through the streets trying to escape the bombs, your old shoes punctured and falling apart, the city clotted with the wounded. You saw all of it. But you were there, you held your ground for as long as you could, just as we were holding our ground at the front. You didn't run away from the city, you allowed it to touch you. And afterward, you cleaned it up, just like we did, you picked up those dishes that weren't broken, and placed the dinner plates back where they belonged, straight and orderly. It was Britain's finest hour, Owen Matthews' voice wavered. That's who held us together, people like Gwyn Thomas. She recognised that to ensure we won the war, she had to stay and resist the nightly bombing even though it was always a shock when each one struck. Owen Matthews slouched and crossed his arms. What is a lady? he asked all of us. Gwyn Thomas, he answered. A lady is able to stand having bombs exploding around her, a lady perseveres, a lady never explodes.

"The blackouts were so black. No lights were allowed on the streets," my grandmother had said once. "We had to feel our way through them. The next morning, they laid the bodies outside on the pavement."

So I had been wrong. I had been wrong, I told Owen Matthews in the way I looked at him as he walked past me. I should have listened to her, and not deferred all the things she had to say. Did I understand how wrong I had been? She had been telling me something that I should have understood, but I'd remained rude, I'd stayed ignorant.

Initially it had been her doing, I decided as we sang the last hymn. She had told me to be wary of something. She didn't speak of it openly, but had said

not to enjoin it. It didn't have a voice. I hadn't known if I should walk into it, if it could ambush me or not. I had thought she'd meant that previous generations had all been in wars or had been compelled to go to war, and that I should avoid doing that. But in the process, I'd avoided listening. I should have gone into her stories. They were undoubtedly connected to her statues, the solid, moiled casts, grounded and spent—the hidden and private forms her trauma had taken.

I should have known how the war affected her in the way she insisted on waking up early every day and checking to see if all the rooms were intact, in the way she'd brighten when the lash of the wind would wear down, and the way she smiled when she looked out on her statues and there was sun. I should have asked her what it was that made her smile. I should have given in, and smiled back. The war must have polished everything she did and saw in a new manner, and made a curve and sheen that she felt compelled to follow. It must have made the world reflect hidden wrinkles. Perhaps that's the reason that when she looked at something, she drilled her gaze deeply into it. Why did I betray her like that, I sighed, while Thomas and I stood and followed the coffin-bearers as they carried my grandmother out of the church. We walked behind them as they took it down the flagstone church steps towards the graveyard.

I should have been able to hear her stories, I should just have been able to see them. I had been unprepared for her confidences, me with my thick skin. I hadn't worked hard enough, I hadn't wondered what it was that made her say or do the things she had. I thought about my parents in Korea. I wondered about their experiences, and how I'd feel hearing about them. My mother was returning in a few days. Would I still have thick skin? Would I want to crawl

into myself every time a new story was brought to the table and I had to listen and look at her wounds? Pain frightened me even if I was only listening. I found it alarming. It was a blight that didn't simply flow away from me, but fixed itself in my mind, blown and tender, circling and quivering. I was sure that, like me, not every person could get used to hearing these stories. I thought that, like me, my mother wouldn't have gotten used to hearing it from her patients. She was accustomed to working in a hospital, not in a war. I should have been able to adapt to my grandmother's stories. I shouldn't have waited until she died and her body was lain out.

I found myself standing over my grandmother's coffin as it lay in the noontime light. The ceremony was almost over, this was the last time that I'd spend with her. I was thinking about my betrayal. If only I'd talked about it in front of her, while she was there. I almost wanted to dance around and around her in an attempt to bring her back. I thought that I would listen to everything she said. I would do anything to support her. But I stood there, and didn't do any of those things, as I watched her coffin being lowered into the ground. She was down, the earth cradling her, with nothing for her to look at except the opening to the sky. I was there beside her, thinking of her death, eating the chopped memories that I'd put on my plate. From where I was looking at her, it was a far way to the ground. But then I turned and thought I caught her there, walking away from the funeral. For a moment, I climbed into her world and saw her poised, taking on life as it waved and shuddered in the air. I thought it circled around her, as she picked up her pace and motioned beyond the stone fence, along the field towards the ocean. There seemed to be a plentifulness

about her then. She had done whatever she'd desired, without the deep regrets that had begun to live with me. "It is possible," I thought I heard her whisper as I lost sight of her.

In another moment, I thought of something she'd said to me once: "I want to have the courage to make a few small gods and join them together."



Like most people, I started the process of burying my body early. Every place I went became part of my grave. I speak of eyelashes, teeth, and scabs of course. The incessant daily death. Take skin, it begins dying when we're born, when the clean hand pulls us out from the hot, bloody sleep. We're washed and the blood blanket is removed, and with it, the first layer, the first skin. It is very thin, cellular. Each time the body is washed, itched, culled, pierced, or nibbled, another layer of skin or loose hair comes off. Then, it finds its burial place around us—in the floorboards, on a street, in the butter that's being spread on some morning toast. By the time a human being reaches the age of seventy-five, there is enough picked skin, hair, and other body stuff to make another entirely new body of the same dimension and density. A hairy, flaky clone.

After tossing a fistful of earth onto my grandmother, I helped my burial process along. I made deep scratches with the nail of my index finger into my wrist. I spelt out my grandmother's name in slim letters: Catrin Gwyndolyn Thomas. I chiselled it into my body so that I belonged to her, so that she knew I

had cared for her. I forced it as deep as I could, incising her name into my skin. I saved my arms for myself. I carved my own name into them: Bitch.

And then there was only Thomas and me there. I flashed those hidden words at the buried earth while Thomas scolded himself for not being able to remember my grandmother on the way to the church. I should have envisioned, I thought, I should have seen beyond my own upsets, my own unpolished life. I had only cared about my thoughts—who I loved.

I spent the first day following my grandmother's funeral helping Thomas sort through her things. She was a collector of sorts. To venture through her trunks, suitcases, and wooden boxes was to find oneself lost for hours beneath layers of curiosities. A magnifying glass, an old hand-sewn foolscap, cut out newspaper illustrations of Cupid, and dried sprigs of lavender were among some of the items I unearthed in a leather satchel. In a wooden crate lined with a film of earth that had obviously once carried turnips or onions, I found sections of a patchwork quilt, an old, dried ram's horn, a list of serial numbers with no reference to their origins, and a beautiful old tea gown that had graceful, flowing lines down its front. These items were found in her chifforobe. There were more boxes crammed under the bed, in the kitchen pantry, and in the barn. Thomas was very firm that we keep those things that reminded him of my grandmother.

After the first day of going through several boxes, he was only able to cull one thing—the brush that she had used to clean her pipe.

During breakfast on the second day, Thomas thought that we should get out of the house and suggested that we tackle the barn. He went ahead of me while I stayed behind, read a letter from my father with the details of my mother's return, and attempted to finish the breakfast he'd made. Fried oatmeal cakes, he'd named the concoction that was glistening on my plate. It was his first attempt at cooking since my grandmother had died. Our neighbours had brought over entire meals up until that point. Had I known that it would be so bad, I would have woken earlier and cooked something myself. From what I could tell, he'd soaked the oatmeal in warm water before dolloping it in a pan of sizzling bacon grease and serving it on a paper-thin layer of catsup.

"It's goooood, isn't it?" he'd said to me, licking his lips as I chewed my first mouthful.

I'd nodded, realising that his enthusiasm and creativity in the culinary arts was an obstacle that I hadn't foreseen. After he'd left for the barn, I generously doused the oatmeal cakes with catsup and pressed onwards through my breakfast. Disposing of his invention would have been impossible not only because I would have felt too guilty throwing it out, but also because we fed our garbage to the pigs and it would have been obvious to him what I thought of his cooking.

As I was finishing my last bite, I looked out the window. It was a sunny day for once. The grass wore a resonant green, lush and full of the previous evening's rain. It contrasted with the new blue of the sky. The sheep were

grazing around the house. All of them had their muzzles pointed down into the turf. It all seemed quite perfect, an ideal day, a moment of calm.

Except I noticed, as I took up my catsup-oiled plate and my unfinished cup of cold tea, they were still there. They were barely perceptible in the strong light of the sun, and could easily be mistaken for a weather-beaten fence or a pile of old farm implements, maybe some scythe handles. But no, their forms emerged, despicable, somehow holding constant despite the thrashing wind that visited every night. My grandmother's figures were still littering the cliffs. Directly in front of me was a row of six thin pieces of wood, all equally spaced apart, running in a diagonal away from the house. Further along the field, where the cliff dipped and some rocky crags rose up as if they had splashed up on the grass, was another series of figures. These were much larger and it appeared that my grandmother had used firewood to build them. On top of each impaled end was a ball. I'd noticed them elsewhere along the cliffs. They were constructed of chicken wire turned over itself several times. Inside was every sort of shell, every kind of mollusk that my grandmother had found—clam, oyster, snail, and tusk shells. These balls of shells almost looked like heads in the way they'd been tilted by the wind. And again, down the fields were even more of these figures, also with great heads, seemingly looking at the bright sky or taking in the vast ocean lips that kissed the headlands.

You will never be able to understand how hideous they were to me then. I didn't know how they could still be there when my grandmother wasn't. They were the things that had destroyed her. Row upon row of them, an army of skeletons taking up space, consuming the land. It was the war that had done that

to her. She had experienced and seen things that could not be communicated in any other way.

I put the dish down in the sink, and walked outside. I thought that I heard my grandmother's voice saying, "It is best to stay away from that part of us," but I cast it out. I went to the nearest row of figures, the thin ones. Before I even knew what I was doing, I started to crack one apart. I kicked it until it fell over, ending the tide of shade that it had brought to us—the doom of my grandmother's death. I was suddenly and violently seized by the nightmare of her dying. I took hold of another piece of wood with my hands and began to wrench it from the ground. I was trying to unmake it, because it had clotted up my grandmother, it had drowned out her logic. I could think only that I must destroy it then, including every statue that littered that place. Those wooden, shelled, wired scars would be sucked away from us. I continued my project, walking to the next row of statues and striking them with the sole of my shoe. I was shouting. It was startling to hear that noise coming out of me. I began to scream, "I hate, I hate." I couldn't do it on my own. I needed a hand to take me. I needed someone to stuff those words into my body and thrust them down my throat, someone to draw my eyes closed and push them down, to grind my tears back where they came from. I wanted someone to take me firmly and heave me against a wall until I broke. I wanted to see the wall's whiteness flying towards me like a raw dream.

I could feel strong hands take my wrists and hold them away from me. It would end. I felt relief. I needed to go. I would ask to be tossed into a stagnant

river. I so badly wanted to escape and be cut off, I wanted to sink quickly with only a fast stream of air bubbles showing the way.

"Megan, Megan," I heard a man's voice say. "It's all right. You're safe now." He looked at me with fierce gaseous eyes. I'd never been this close to my grandfather and I noticed for the first time that he looked remarkably like my mother. It was the upper part of his face—his nose and eyes were hers. "What a lass," my grandfather began to loosen his grip on my wrists. "Don't you listen? You spend too much time in that dream world of yours." He looked at me. I was exhausted. My heart seemed like it was full of phlegm. My hair felt matted and big. And for the first time, my arm was tender where I had scraped it at my grandmother's funeral.

Thomas sat me down right there on the ground, rolled up a cigarette, lit it, and passed it to me. I held it in my mouth and felt my head settle as I inhaled deeply. I thought about how my grandmother should have died in her sleep. That's how it should have ended, that's what should have happened.

Thomas gave me a loving jab in the shoulder. He spoke with both hands gripping his knees and an unlit cigarette held in his mouth. My poor grandfather. I'm sure the last thing he expected was to find me screaming at pieces of wood, while he was trying to go through a quiet day of mourning. He told me that he didn't want me to pull out the statues. They reminded him of my grandmother. She had obviously worked hard on them, and would probably have wanted them to remain after her death. I closed my eyes. I told him that she would continue living for me until they were gone. It was quite a while before he actually responded. But when he did, he said that he understood, that there was probably

no real difference between having these pieces of wood everywhere and cleaning it all up.

He was content to continue my work, bringing a wheelbarrow to haul away the pieces of wood and taking a mallet to them. I stayed there, touching the ground with my fingertips. To take away those symbols was to know that my grandmother was no longer there, that her mortality was final. One day I would be able to hold her memory in my mind, I thought, and even possibly speak to her, but I didn't want it to be that day.

Orange was the colour. It came and curled its tail in vitreous circles. It swallowed the oncoming dusk, and surrounded the dust-covered hills. It took over the circular orb of the sun with its predictable red blushes and stole the veil that lay in the centre of its papillae. It was an orange unlike the hesperidium. It was well-lit and self-reflected. It was innocent, unwanted, and forgotten. Then the thundering began and the hills were fired in their coral light. It was not the colour of the end, but of the beginning.

A few days before my mother's return, it was Guy Fawkes Night. Thomas told me that it marked the day when the Guy was caught red-handed as he tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament back in the seventeenth century. Bonfires were going to be lit, effigies burned, and fireworks set off on the beach quite a ways from our house. Thomas protested that it was an imported English celebration that I shouldn't waste my time on, but he changed his mind when he

realised that it was an opportunity for me to taste treacle toffee and perhaps to acquire the recipe for him. I was more interested in eating the traditional pork sausages grilled over the bonfire, served with mustard, and buttered jacket potatoes—anything other than Thomas' cooking.

I was also enchanted with the fact that I was going there alone with Una. Since Iwan was sick from something he'd eaten, Una was able to meet me. I wondered if it could have perhaps been the poison that I was feeding him in my mind, if he had taken it, if my hex on his genitals was finally working. Part of me wanted to tell Una about it—it meaning him and me, but another part of me wanted to keep it from her.

I was to meet her across the field along the path by the cliffs. I left later that evening, after the night sky had become starred and blanketed. When I opened the door, the drive of the wind was fierce, and forced it back so that it banged against the wall and echoed in the house. I could hear Thomas' snoring become just louder in response—exhausted, he had gone to sleep just shortly before. I reached for his old pilot jacket and gripped it around me like a soft shield as I went out in the wind.

I had to squint because the blasts of air seemed to be pushing my eyelashes back. My eyeballs felt like they were covered with cheesecloth. When I reached the barn, I was able to see that a fire was flickering not so far off, and further away still, there were small pieces of light that glimmered high and low on the gentle slopes. The rest of the landscape was a muddled, pasted grey. The sky seemed unusually close to the earth and it tumbled above me like oil-soaked sand. For once, the walk out to the field seemed uneven. My mouth was stopped

up by the ululating wind when I called for Dewi.

As I walked along the raised path that bordered the fields, the bluster made sharp whistles through the outbuildings that I passed. Thin lines of piercing cold traced their way into me like I was an open door, then faded into chills in my ears and cupped hands. I followed the path, just slightly anxious to be saved from the wind, and also to find Una. I saw the outlines of trees leaning and stretching out like adders' tongues. I wanted to run, or walk faster, but the path stretched before me, long and black, and I was afraid of losing my way. I thought about finding the road, but decided against it, as it would take double the time to get to my meeting point with Una.

The ground wound up a large embankment—it seemed bloated from the wind pushing into it. I took my time going up the bank, humming small sounds as I did so. The wind was so strong that I couldn't hear myself. I leaned forward towards the knoll with one hand outstretched, while the other was held against the wind to balance myself. My eyes were almost level with the slope of the headland, and followed it as it rose skywards. The shouldering of the wind made it seem as if I was looking out over a grassy ocean. I was surprised to see that someone was there at the top of the hill with her back towards me, sitting on the stile in the wall where the footpath ended. At that moment, I thought of something that my grandmother had said to me, "Be as you would have. Be as you would." The words rushed into me, passing through the screen on which the person I was seeing had been chiselled. And for a moment, there was clarity. But when I looked again, the person still sat on the stile.

My meeting spot with Una was still a little further away, so I knew that it couldn't be her. And if it was, I wondered how she'd been able to get there, whether she'd had to fight the wind until it seemed that she was dangling and dragging herself uselessly against it. I called out to her, but my voice was carried off as soon as it left my mouth. She was dressed in a light wrap that was draped around her, leaving only a vague indentation of her body. I wanted to make sure that we were still going to follow the same path, instead of perhaps trying to find the road. It seemed futile to continue walking up that hill only to walk down again. I waited for some gesture that she could hear me, but there was none. Some of my hair whipped across my face. A few more words dropped out of me. I couldn't see Una very well except for the light gown that she was wearing. It seemed to be swept away by the wind that worked seamlessly all about us. The night was ordered in deep violets and dark purples. It was the colour of crushed plum, blooming in translucent layers. I continued to make my way up the hill. My steps were so slow that they made me feel inanimate. I stopped climbing for a long moment and looked up. Una's body seemed poised. I could tell she was listening. I waited for her to turn around. I waited for what seemed like a long time. But she didn't turn around to see me, she was looking ahead of her out the dark night in front of her, she was listening. The creak of the stile gate, a bending of the trees by the stone wall. I realised that those were the things she was focusing on—not the sound of me calling for her to turn around. I continued panting my way up. I knew that she probably couldn't see me even if she turned around. The thought occurred to me that she may even have gotten lost on her walk to meet me and had just decided to sit on that

ledge, surveying the direction she'd walked, waiting for the wind to smooth out and stop hammering. I couldn't think how she'd ended up there, surrounded by the purple nightfall. Perhaps she hadn't even been able to see in front of her into the dark.

As I thought about this, I looked up and started. My thoughts crumbled into a crust. Nothing had prepared me for this, none of the stories I knew. Una had disappeared into the night, leaked suddenly out of my view into the salty draft. There had been no sounds. I tried to clear my eyes. I wanted to defy what I was seeing. She wasn't there anymore. I stared, trying to bring her back.

I realised that it must have been some kind of a dream. The entire time that I thought I was looking at Una, my mind must have been away somewhere else. That was the only way to explain the waking vision of her on that night. I didn't even really know if it had been her. It could just as easily have been my mother come out of the war, still in her nurses' uniform, my grandmother off looking for signs of people wandering along the cliffs, or even myself with my body changed because I'd been touched by love. Maybe I'd actually fallen asleep while I was walking up the hill, or I was only remembering something that had happened in a dream. It was incomprehensible to me. The image must have come from somewhere. That's the only reason it could have disappeared. It was night, it wasn't so strange that I may have been dreaming with my eyes open. Perhaps it was a person who I'd seen before, and her image was simply continuing on, playing out a story that I'd almost forgotten.

I persevered to the top of the hill, and over the stile where the white lady had sat. I could see a light emerge out of the black—a Guy Fawkes' Day bonfire.

It wasn't far. When I eventually reached the junction where the road intersected the pathway, Una was waiting, leaning against a stone wall. I called out to her in a voice that wasn't quite my own. It was a low sound, almost a deep cry.

"Am I awake?" I asked her, but I knew that the dream had already left me, because I could see that she was real.

"What is it, Megan?" Una reached out and gripped my arm. She pressed my head lightly with the palms of her hands while I told her about what I'd seen.

"Your eyes must just have mistaken something in the wind for a real person," she said after I choked out my story. She filled me up with sweet words, breaking apart my strange vision. We began to walk towards the Guy Fawkes' Day fires.

On the way there, I went to the bottom of my fear to where I could barely breathe, "What is wrong with me?" I almost thought I could hear my heartbeat heaving inside my chest.

In a moment of silence, I thought I could see Una's sapphire, turquoise eyes glistening. "Nothing, nothing at all, Megan," she was doing her best to quell my worry. I only caught phrases of what she said: "need to be...I know...become grounded again...everything else will cease."

Throughout the time that Una was speaking to me, I said this to myself: never try to change the way another person lives, never wish to change something for my own sake, never wish to change people because I don't understand them, never shut them out. I told myself not to do these things, because they could happen. I had wished to separate myself from my grandmother's world and I had. Or rather, she'd left me. She also left my

grandfather and everything else, even her pipe and the statues she'd made. Perhaps there was a collective net of consciousness that had made this happen. Underlying fears encased in the most intense seat of emotion: imagine if they didn't simply remain lodged in the time and place in which they were thought, but were flung out in every direction? I had told Thomas that she would remain alive until her statues were destroyed. We had broken them, and then I'd seen that thing, that person on the stile waiting. What was wrong with me? I was seeing things.

The approaching Guy Fawkes' Day pyre looked like an egg yolk surrounded by dark albumin. To my surprise and marvel, into my body slipped the most delicate warmth—Una took my hand. The wind had cooled and the sky was dotted with stars under which the last layers of grey clouds spread one over the other. The land rolled gently in long strings without upturned, spiked banks, while the barley-planted fields quilted the earth. The landscape's cloak no longer seemed to be unfurling.

The events of the evening, the events of the day, stayed with me until we reached the first fire. The hand that Una was holding was on fire—there were flames shooting up from every side of it. It was on fire and catching. Already there was the flicker of flames up my arm and along my front, licking upwards in transparent reds and oranges. Soon it would catch onto my chest and then my throat. It was more than a dream. It was the finest moment. I wanted to call out in hysterical happiness. We didn't say anything, but kept our eyes looking forwards. Mine wanted to wander to the place where our fingers were intertwined. All of me felt like it had gone to orange, bursting and vibrant. Just

then, Una turned towards me and smiled. I could see that the flames had started to cover her also. I could have spent the entire night walking to the fires and never arrived there, but it wasn't long before we could see the outlines of people and she released me. I was amazed that no one saw us blazing.

Jane

Tongues of light like pale floods burst onto the sky. Yellow and red pieces of air, like a million translucent birds, their feathers shimmering and reflecting, their wings twittering in a frantic night flight. The shaken ether has strange light ghosts around it. There is a kind of fire on its spume. It leads a life of inferno and illumination. Light cannot stop its rapid lying on the air. Its waking sleep, its invisible dreams and nightmares, transparent to our eyes. It cruises around our heads, like birds that have the strength to hover in hurricanes. Still, floating beasts, singing in storms. Flying close to us, appearing as an omen of strength and friendship in hell.

Where is the sun and why will it not come up? How many minutes until there is light? Another day with no protection. She should write a letter. There must be something else. She needs her mother. She needs something else, some protection. Her mother. She needs. A tray placed in front of her. The eggs.

Scrambled. Yes, and strawberry jam. Coffee. Milk. The eggs will occupy her. They are not powdered and neither is the milk. Real milk. She drinks it, leaving her coffee black. Thin lines of steam rise out of the food. This is what she needs. She will eat and it will be all she needs. It reminds her of the soldiers when they were admitted and were given something—anything to occupy them. Cigarettes, coffee, and ditty bags that contained a comb, toothbrush, shaving cream, and a razor. Some were too withdrawn, she had to be careful how she treated them, she could not break through their silence to talk to them. They were obviously psychiatric cases.

The stewardess asks her if she wants anything else.

“Yes,” Jane answers, but she does not know what it is.

The stewardess smiles.

Jane returns to her breakfast. She is eating real eggs for the first time in a long while. These are fluffed and very unlike the grainy, dry pellet-like eggs she is used to. The plate is similar. It is metal and compartmentalised. She is careful that none of the food goes over the edges. She pushes everything back into the centre and presses it down. Everything must stay in the centre. It reminds her of how the cone of light from the lamp in their tent had centred on them when her husband—the bastard, don’t call him that, don’t call him, no names for him, he’s good, no names for him, leave him without names, leave him there and good—her husband had suggested that she leave Korea.

Even though I hadn't wanted to, we left in the early morning because we had to go on a sheep run that day. It wasn't that long of a journey, but we had to let them rest now and then. Thomas was ahead of me ranging them. A true sheepdog, Dewi was running around them in circles. He was building his own small planet out of the white sheep he was gathering.

All I really wanted to do was talk with my mother. She'd already been back for a couple days by that point, but we hadn't even been able to have a coherent conversation. She spent almost all of her time sleeping in my grandmother's old room crying softly. I think that it was a shock for her to return and not find my grandmother there. I would wake up several times throughout the night, listening to the sounds of her quiet sobbing. Sometimes I heard her getting up, walking around, bumping into the chair, opening and closing the door. I got out of bed a few times, in search of comfort and solace,

crying for the loss of my grandmother's words that had started to escape me. I felt my way through the dark, climbing up the stairs with both hands braced on the walls, skimming the old block-printed wallpaper. But by the time I reached her door, everything would be still again, there would be no motion on the other side, no sounds of crying. During the day, Thomas told me that my mother spent time writing to my father or sleeping. I didn't want to let her sleep, but she was obviously exhausted and needed to. I was relieved also that Una had been right—the ink marks in the margins had only been blotchy pens. I had been reading the strings of her lines too strongly for some kind of tragedy. There was nothing anymore wrong with her than there was with me.

So instead of visiting with my mother, there I was with Thomas and the land and the sky. My reality: a November Sunday in 1952 on a wet, Welsh field.

"It's grand that Jane's back with us, eh Megan?" Thomas said, as he finished rolling a cigarette for me.

"It would be better if I could speak with her. You know, make sure she's all right," I answered, as I took it from him.

"That'll happen soon enough. And she's just fine. Mourning for Gwyn is all. Tired is all," he coughed. "War's one of the most exhausting things possible. I still feel like I'm not fully recovered from the Blitz, and it's going on ten years ago now. I wouldn't be surprised if she slept for the rest of your father's tour of duty. Even that he'd find her asleep when he comes to bring you two back home in a couple of months."

"I'm hoping that maybe she'll get up today," I said. "Why are we working on a Sunday, anyhow?" I asked Thomas. "Why not take a day off?"

“Not used to days off,” he threw back to me over his shoulder. “There were no holidays when I was growing up, not until the first war started.”

“That was a long time ago,” I replied.

“Not for me,” he answered.

We were going to the Wynn-Ellis’ to borrow some paint and his two bucks. The ewes were in heat and Thomas needed to see which ones would get pregnant. The paint would help him determine this.

“It’s a kind of *cymortha*,” he said to me as we were walking.

“A what?” I’d said back to him.

“Cym-or-tha,” he replied, but this time shouting.

“I heard the word, Thomas. I just don’t understand what it means,” I huffed.

“Oh, right. It’s a kind of mutual help system—Wynn-Ellis will lend us the bucks and we’ll give him some of the lambs.”

I’d seen blue and red marks on the sheep as we took walks along Gwyn, but I hadn’t understood. I thought it was just something that happened to their fur—parts of it bled into a vibrant blue or a deep red from exposure to the rain and the wind, or it was a kind of sheep whose fur changed a different colour depending on the temperature: blue sheep for a cool day, red sheep for a warm. But actually, the buck’s stomachs were coated in this paint. When they mounted the ewes, the paint rubbed off on their backs. Based on the appearance of newly painted backs, it could be predicted when the ewes would give birth, almost to the day. Thomas needed to know this, because he’d already discussed handing

the lambs over to the butcher in Llanelli, but he wanted to know how many lambs he'd be able to sell.

I'd protested this, saying it was cruel to end the lamb's lives before they'd even begun. He didn't see it the same way as I did. He said that the money would be helpful. He didn't see them as lives so much as livestock. I think it was part of the process of him returning to the country—he wanted to prove to himself that he could make an income off the farm. Or perhaps he wanted to disprove it so there would be a reason for him to have made the decision to live in London.

Beyond all that, I could see that the scars from my grandmother's death were healing, and he was becoming his old self again. It was in the way he walked so quickly across the fields and smiled back at me to hurry up and stop dawdling, to get out of my head and share my thoughts with him. It was in the way he smoked also, just leaving the cigarette in his mouth and letting the smoke trail behind him. He looked like a train engine, a human locomotive puffing over the fields.



I couldn't understand a word Pugh Wynn-Ellis said as we walked up to his barn with all our sheep. It sounded like "I've had a stick of butter up my arse," but I just knew that couldn't have been it. The amazing thing was that as soon as Thomas started talking, his cigarette leaning out of his mouth, he sounded the same. "A two and a four would make a great shake with berries," but that's all I

could make out. They continued their exchange in Welsh, laughing at something, smoke escaping into the air in front of their faces.

Then it all fell into place for me—Thomas was a sheep farmer. Perhaps this was already obvious to you, but it was the first time I'd thought it. The grey knit sweater, the dishevelled hair, the worn leather boots, and most of all, the sheep that were wandering around him. The picture I was looking at could have been a hundred years older and it would have looked the same. It was more than that to me also. It was the point of recognition of a person, of Thomas. It was seeing who he was. It was so rare. With many people, I could know them for much longer than I'd known Thomas, but never get a vision of who they were. I would see their surface, their actions, and not much else. It was like perceiving his soul for me. His soul glistened.

Then on the edge of my thoughts Thomas was saying, "Megan will help, that way, she'll learn about the farm."

Wake up, I told myself. Some days it felt like I really didn't partake in the world that everyone else did and I was just an observer watching it unfold in front of me. Unlike my grandmother, I didn't seem to wander out into the world, but remained enclosed within my own.

I had to help with herding. We were trying to get all the sheep into a large pen that was beside the barn. The three of us walked in a semicircle driving them into the narrow entranceway. One or two got skittish and ran off. Thomas yelled at Dewi who chased them back to us while nipping at their heels. We shut the gate and walked back to the barn.

On the way there, Pugh Wynn-Ellis said, "Must be great to have your mum back safe."

"It's a huge relief," I answered.

"How's she doing anyway? Feeling glad to be back?" he kicked a hard ball of mud with the toe of his boot.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "I haven't been able to talk with her yet. She's been sleeping the entire time that she's been back."

"That's good. She'll probably come around in a couple days," Pugh Wynn-Ellis said. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he pointed to the palm of his hand. It looked like it had a thick, brown paste on it. "That's cow shit, Megan," he said to me, bringing it closer to me so that I could get a better look at it. "There's nothing to it. It's just shit."

"Okay," I looked at it. "I've seen it before."

That response must have satisfied him, because he nodded and wiped his hand on his pant leg.

The inside of the barn smelled like a warm wool blanket that had been heated on a stove. We walked down to two pens at the end where the bucks were kept. They paced back and forth in the dim light. As we approached, I thought the noise was that of people who'd been walking around in the barn, caught in the pens tramping for hours, anxious for the gate to be unlocked. I didn't know the difference between the sound of an animal and the sound of a person. Pugh Wynn-Ellis clarified the sound of a person for me when he went into another pen looking for the paint—the sound of metal cans falling on each other, a shelf full of wooden stir-sticks being pushed aside, the placid talking to himself. He

came out of the area holding a can without a label and handed it to me with an old brush.

He and Thomas went into one of the sheep's pens. The sheep stopped pacing and looked directly ahead of it. Pugh Wynn-Ellis told me that they would grab it, turn it over, and then I would paint its stomach. The buck must have been able to hear, because at that point, it started to run around the pen, kicking up its back legs. Pugh Wynn-Ellis shot his arms out at the buck. But he missed it and managed to plunge his fingers into some sheep dung instead. Swearing slightly, he didn't even have time to wipe them off, because Thomas had taken the sheep in a headlock and he was sitting on the straw with the sheep kicking on top of him. Pugh Wynn-Ellis grabbed the sheep's hind legs and pushed them to the ground. It was trying to fight back, it was heaving, its mouth was open, but it wasn't making any sound.

"Go ahead Megan," Thomas said to me while I held the paint can and watched the sheep.

I stepped forward and stirred the brush around. The paint was red and coagulated just slightly—it felt a bit stiff when I stirred it. The sheep's eyes were opened widely, moving back and forth. They almost looked like human eyes. I thought I could see small, red veins in them that shot through their whites like electrical currents. Its eyelashes were brown. Although its nostrils were open and flat, the sheep's breathing sounded like Thomas and Pugh Wynn-Ellis' who still had to hold the buck's legs down firmly. Its gasping was steady and fast. I could feel it on my arm as I brought the brush over its body. Somewhere inside it was a heart pumping, just like my heart did. What—I asked myself, with the

paint brush poised over its quivering body and Thomas telling me to cover the entire surface of its chest with two long brush strokes—was the difference between a sheep and a human being? It had an awareness of its own mortality just as much as I did, just as much as my grandmother must have had. I made a long stroke down the sheep's chest with my wet brush. The fur was dripping red, the curls saturated with it. I saw that the sheep's eye was sliding backwards and the chest rising up and down, faster now.

"That's it, Love," Pugh Wynn-Ellis said to me while I painted another long stroke down the sheep's chest.

For one moment, I saw my grandmother. She was there in front of me with the two wide strokes of paint down her chest. Thomas had her in a headlock, Pugh Wynn-Ellis was holding onto her legs. Her sad eyes were looking at me and then rolling back in her head. She was breathing through her nose. There were no sounds coming out of her, no screams.

"Good job, Megan," Thomas said to me, as Pugh Wynn-Ellis released my grandmother.

With the same blank expression on her face, my grandmother hurriedly positioned her hands on the floor and then walked into the corner of the pen on all fours. She became a sheep again, just as suddenly as she'd become herself at first. The sheep found a feeding trough and began eating.

We did the next sheep more quickly.



After putting his bucks in the pen with our ewes, Pugh Wynn-Ellis invited us for elevenses, "so the sheep could have some privacy while doing their business." Thomas declined, saying that he didn't want them to go through any trouble, but Pugh Wynn-Ellis said that there wasn't any since it had already been made. What he neglected to tell us was that they had also invited Iwan and he was already there when I walked in, reading the Farmer's Almanac at the kitchen table.

"I can understand the entries by the agricultural and medical advisers, but why astrology has been included among the sciences seems only as a means of deluding and amusing the vulgar," he said to Jan Wynn-Ellis, who was stirring something in a pot on the stove.

Jan Wynn-Ellis smiled demurely, agreeing that it was a little strange. I, for one, found his comment aggravating, and barely nodded in his direction as he scarcely did in mine. I sat down at the opposite end of the table, while Thomas and Pugh Wynn-Ellis went into the parlour to smoke. Of course, there had been a time when it would have really done something for me. His words, so assured and direct, working their way into me, moving about until they found a comfortable spot to reside, and then holding onto me until they effected their own release. Before, I hadn't had a choice—they came in and left without my consent. I thought about my mother, and how I would much rather have been talking with her than Iwan.

Jan Wynn-Ellis came over to me and squeezed my shoulder, "Oh, Megan. It must be good to have your mum back safe and sound."

"It really is," I answered, feeling some of the tension and worries about my mother leaving me.

"I've made her some bakestone cakes for you to take back with you." She motioned to a package on the top of the stove.

"You didn't need to do that." I smiled at her, noticing at the same time, that Iwan raised his eyebrows and let out a sigh at us.

"It was nothing," Jan Wynn-Ellis replied, as she smiled at the plates that she was setting out in front of us. "We'll have all of you over once she's feeling a bit better. Say in a fortnight's time."

I nodded. "Is Una not yet back from the Lettis Leefe?" I asked her, turning away from Iwan. Una worked there part-time in Rhossili, and made pasties among other things.

"Should be soon." Jan Wynn-Ellis looked at the gear train of the kitchen clock. "Do you know, Megan, that I taught Una how to turn a perfect ball of dough in less than six folds?" Jan Wynn-Ellis boasted like she often did about her children, the rest of whom were nowhere to be seen. "The potato, cheese and onion filling, anyone can make, but forming the dough takes a special touch," Jan Wynn-Ellis said while she glanced at both Iwan and me. I smiled at her, while Iwan scarcely nodded and turned a page of the Almanac.

That was also something that I'd found curious and intriguing about him at one point—the fact that he was so cool and reserved when he taught us at school. It had made me interested in what lay underneath, but I could see from his disposition at the Wynn-Ellises that he was always like that.

"Those are skills that you have for life, the basics," Jan Wynn-Ellis continued, now focussing more on me since Iwan seemed to be immersed in his

reading. “I taught Una how to cook, and now every day, we have good food on our table, fresh pasties. What could be better than a fresh pasty?”

Nothing, I decided as I bit into the crust half an hour later, it was soft like whipped cotton. The inside had been churned into a smooth cream. Una had brought them back from the shop with her and was sitting opposite me. For some reason, no matter where we were, we always ended up sitting across from one another, and I was left to gaze at her cobalt eyes.

They were talking about the new teaching position that Iwan was considering taking, while Jan Wynn-Ellis ladled out cauliflower soup into the bowls in front of us. I withdrew, trying to think instead, whether or not Jan Wynn-Ellis had bleached her table napkins out in the sun. As Iwan spoke about school boards, the fingers of my stomach began tapping. Then he started saying that if he became an administrator, he could make a fair salary, looking towards Pugh Wynn-Ellis for approval. Pugh Wynn-Ellis looked back at him vaguely. I could tell that they didn’t completely understand one another—I could almost see a wall between them that curved over Iwan’s head and held him clamped down.

Or maybe that’s the way I wanted him to be in my own mind, my recollections of him encased and put to the side so that they would only rise when I summoned them. That must have been the way it worked for him, because he didn’t seem to give me any more notice than the soup in his bowl or the butter knife next to his plate. I decided that I would do the same. I would make him small for me. A thing in the distance that I couldn’t see up close. I would no longer carry him with me. Not that it was actually him that I carried, it

was what we'd done that I carried with me. And we'd only done it once. We had cut that piece of fabric into a new shape, and glued it together. He had fixed me by going up into my house, squatting in my hallway, and burning a small circle like a black sun into my floor.

I know that I'm not being clear. What I mean is that we did it. Iwan and I. It was rather unexpected, and I wasn't even in love with him. I had liked his hands and the way they held the chalk. The way he looked at me also, I guess. But that was when I first arrived in Wales. It happened in the beginning of the following school year, only about a month before. Autumn was yellowing everything, and I had a new English teacher, a Mrs Budgell. A couple days into class I went to the English office in search of her advice. I was keen on writing my essay question on Dylan Thomas' *The Map of Love*. I found that neither she nor the other English teachers were there, only Iwan.

"That's not really what you're interested in," he said back to me when I told him what I wanted.

"I beg your pardon?" I responded because it was what I was really interested in. And while I tried to think of what text he thought I should examine, he got out of his chair and closed the door. Finding the space between us narrowed, I didn't know quite what to do, and so I yawned. And that's how he caught my mouth—in the middle of a yawn. Such a strange feeling, because my eyes were already closed. It felt congested, and it was actually a feeling of relief when he created more space by lifting up my skirt. I didn't know what kind of place I was in, but my body seemed to know how to function well in that privacy.

“Megan, you will be great some day,” Iwan had whispered to me as he brought his mouth down the craw of my throat.

“A great what?” I’d asked, shuddering, not knowing quite what was happening, still seeing the cover of *The Map of Love* in my head.

“A great what...,” he repeated, as I heard the opening of the teeth of his fly.

A great what. I would be a great what as I spent day after day studying and thinking with a man at my gullet. That’s what I would be. It was the only thing that I was left with—a great what. I assumed the translation would be that my life was one large questioning, someone who never stopped asking.

And that was it. My virginity was gone in five minutes. I supported myself on his desk as the unmarked papers came in and out of focus. I had felt like I could be anything. I vigorously dropped down onto him, casting him into a man. He had pushed himself into me from behind like Pugh Wynn-Ellis’ rams were doing to Thomas’ ewes on that very Sunday that I was sipping cauliflower soup facing Una. But he’s not really the person who took my virginity, he’s not really the person to plant seed in me. It could never, never have been him. That’s the truth. Yes...well...I don’t want to confuse the order of the story. I can tell you more later.

Please do not mistake the bitterness I extended towards him later as something I felt at the time of our communion, because I didn’t mind it. In fact, I especially liked the way my house rose, the way it expanded, and felt really lived in for the first time. It was later that I began to detest him. It wasn’t the fact that we were never together again and he never traced his eyes along the

lines of my body; it wasn't because of some unrequited love that I later developed for him. It was because of what everyone was talking about at lunch. It made the cauliflower soup feel like it was seeping into my veins, it made me frown. It was Iwan's career, the things Iwan had. I couldn't have them, I couldn't do them. In fact, I couldn't do very much. The only thing that I could do was look at things. Did that count? I thought that I didn't do it in the same way as other people. When I saw something, I remembered it forever. The green trees near our house back in Canada—I could bring them to me any time I wanted them, rising like spindly fingers out of the ground, covered in leafy fur. I didn't just walk by something without seeing it. I knew the language of things more than I knew the language of people. I seemed to understand the language of the sea better, and the plane of clouds that was continually rushing over it. Sometimes I even wished I were a tree. No, the reason I scorned Iwan was that he had something I could never have. He was engaged to be married to Una.



When we went back to the pen to get the sheep, Thomas said, "Sheep do it very quickly—in and out and then it's back to eating grass like they've forgotten it'd ever happened in the first place."

The first conversation I had with my mother happened the next day after I returned from school in the late afternoon. The evening dusk was coming on. I sat in the carved-back chair in her room. On the desk next to her bed was writing paper and envelopes. One piece of paper in particular grasped my attention—along its edge were perfectly formed circles that had been drawn onto the paper with a fountain pen. I looked at it for so long that it almost seemed as if they were two small, rotating planets. As I searched it, I remembered a word that I'd once heard my grandmother speak: "approaching." I wanted to pick it up to look at it more closely, but the sleep started easing itself off my mother's eyelids.

She awoke, open-eyed and shocked, not knowing who I was. She said, "You've found me. I'm not ready."

"Mum, it's me. It's Meg," I said, as I reached over and touched her arm.

She pulled away from me, her eyes bent and looking to the side. In another instant, I could see that her nightmare or whatever it was had passed. We both apologised. She was calm. Her eyes were swollen from crying. She leaned against a pillow, and listened to me. The room was full of the beating of the ocean wind. I don't know what I talked about—sheep maybe, my plans to go to university after I graduated from high school, Thomas' cooking, the way my grandmother would take long walks along the beach by herself. I didn't really mean to bring it up, but I ended up talking about how my grandmother had died—how she just hadn't come home for dinner one night after she'd gone through all the trouble of making macaroni cheese, because I'd said that it was one of my favourites; how Thomas and I had waited and waited looking at the clock every few minutes, and gone outside to gaze across the horizon in every direction without any success; how after a dinner filled with the strangest silence, we both went out to look for her and in that time, the sky had burst into the most vibrant crimson that I'd ever seen, a red that I somehow knew only existed for that moment and that I'd never see again; how he'd decided to ring up the neighbours, who all arrived at the farm within the hour to form search parties; how Thomas and I went out together into the night, pushing through the dark grasses that lined the cliffs, shining a lantern into them; how I somehow knew that it was all wrong and we wouldn't find her there; how the search was called off in the early morning hours; how I thought that being back in the house felt strange; how I stayed up all night staring out the window at the foot of my bed, imagining her appearing out on the field more than a thousand times; how the next day and the next were the worst of my life; how we waited and

waited surrounded by people who I barely knew; how I wished old Evan Edwards dead the moment I overheard him say that the sea would give her body back any day now; and then how it did.

I knew I had been wrong to tell my mother about my grandmother's death so soon after her return. I had been hearing her cry, but I hadn't seen it yet. What I saw hurled through her in waves. She tried to cover her wet face. She wasn't able to stop. She started dry heaving. It was horrible. I tried to tell her that everything would be all right, but I found it frightening. I wanted to tell her the words that my grandmother had once told to me: "be as you would."

Instead, I changed the subject, "What was it like to live in Korea?"

It seemed like a pointless thing to ask at that moment, but it was the only thing that I could think of saying. What I was really saying to her from somewhere inside me was "Don't be afraid, Gwyn's all right now," but it came out in another question, "Why don't you tell me about your work in the army hospitals?" That's not what I meant to say at all. It's not that I'm insensitive, although you might think so from my actions, it's just that I couldn't say it. Say

what? What did I want to say? “I’m sorry about your mother,” “I loved her too,” “She’s safe,” “She probably didn’t know what happened.” But instead, what did I say? I kept repeating myself, leaning over her where she lay on the bed: “Why don’t you tell me about nursing in Korea?” I raised my voice. “Why don’t you tell me about the war?” I began to speak louder. “The war...” It was the only thing I could get out. “The war...” I should have just let myself cry but didn’t. “Korea...” I kept saying, as if it was the one thing that would help her with her mourning, as if it was the answer, as if it was the reason my grandmother had died. “War, Mum, war...” I should have just reached out and touched her shoulder, but I couldn’t, I held myself back. “Why don’t you...” I said until she finally did, and stopped crying. But that wasn’t what I’d wanted at all. I just meant to tell her that I was sorry. I didn’t know how to do that. It’s not easy to show another person your feelings you know. It’s not easy for me. Not easy at all.

I knew that she didn’t like discussing her feelings either. Her letters had always been vague, discussing details that I didn’t really care about. In one, she had written me that she didn’t mind eating in the mess hall. Her favourite lunch was sausage rolls in gravy. For dessert, she liked Jell-O, because it tasted clean. She liked the fact that she couldn’t identify what was in Jell-O, and that it didn’t look like any other kind of food. It didn’t disguise itself. It always tasted like itself even when it was in a pie or a fruit salad, it didn’t change. In fact, she had continued in her letter, Jell-O was the only foodstuff that didn’t modify its form or dissipate altogether after it had been mixed with other foods. It was easy to pick out. It was something pure. I hadn’t known what to make of this tight little

note that she'd enclosed with my father's. I couldn't get a sense of what life felt like for her. Her words came and went like clouds. And I was left there with nothing.

My father's notes were much clearer. He was tired, he'd written me. He'd been working without a day off for nine days. It's not because there was so much to do, but because two of the other surgeons had gotten sick from the flu that was going around. The weather was also stinking hot with the sun beating down on the brown scrub and the dusty ochre-coloured soil on the hills. The sky shimmered with heat. A fine dust was everywhere—on telephone wires, in parked vehicles, in hair, and down throats. He thought of me every day and wanted me to send him a picture of my grandparents and me in front of our house by the sea.

Those were the kinds of things I wanted to hear from my mother, things I could grasp. So when she started to speak of her experiences that afternoon, I listened, even though I really wanted to tell her how sorry I was about my grandmother, how she wouldn't have been in any pain when she died, how she brought so much to the world. But I was also thinking that my grandmother's death might have been prevented had I listened to her. I wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

"The best thing about living in Korea was seeing the sun rise in the mornings," my mother started, raising herself up on her elbows. "Sometimes I had to start working just after I woke up. It would be dark except for the lamps in the operating stations. But to know that I was awake while the sun was rising was almost as good as seeing it rise. The sun seemed large in the mornings,

much larger than the sunrises in Canada. It rose over the Korean mountains every morning, like a large, red eye. I knew it so well that I could almost tell the time by its position. And it was the same sun that we share, Megan. That's the incredible thing," she said, suddenly cheerful, just like her old self.

"What about the people?" I asked, pulling my feet up into the chair I was sitting in.

"The people I worked with?" she answered.

"No, the Koreans," I said.

"Well, we didn't have much contact with the Korean people outside of our base. So I didn't really get to speak with people personally. It was an entirely different world. Korean men wore cotton, off-white shirts, and pants that made their legs and arms billow out. They also wore black hats that fit snugly on their heads. They looked like shrunken top hats, and they all had a thick string that tied under their chins. They also wore black, wooden clogs on their feet. They looked uncomfortable, but I heard that they were good for walking through the wet rice fields."

"And what about the women?" I questioned.

"Oh, the women." My mother seemed lively. "The women dressed in long, wide gowns in light colours. On top of the gowns, they wore short, jacket-like blouses that were also large and billowy." It was difficult to get a picture of this, I imagined that Korean women looked like kites. When I drew them in my mind, I imagined that they were weightless. Perhaps something like all women who wore white gowns, like she-ghosts and brides. They could float above

everything, they could hover over the war. I pictured that the sky over Korea had millions of women in white floating over tanks and mortar fire.

“Something else,” my mother continued, gesturing for me to pass her the package of cigarettes on the bedside table beside the letter with the circles on it. “Some of the women had small tubes hanging down just below their jackets, at the base of the sternum.” She motioned to the junction of her ribs with the tip of her unlit cigarette. “I saw a few of them close up. They were made from gold, silver, jade, malachite, or even ox horn and shark skin. They were often decorated with designs of chrysanthemums, dragons, trees, or phoenixes. It could be pulled apart at the centre. It was a sheath on one side and a blade on the other. The blade had a long, razor edge. They were unique because they weren’t designed for defending oneself against an assailant. They were carried during wars so that women could save themselves from a fall from grace. The principle was simple.” My mother paused and took a drag of her cigarette. I knew what she was going to say, but I didn’t want to hear it. “The blade was drawn when a woman was facing her assailant, and she brought the knife across her own throat instead of his. It was so sharp, that it sliced through the larynx. She would either bleed to death or suffocate.”

This wasn’t the direction I intended on bringing our conversation towards at all. I hadn’t wanted to remind my mother of the horrible things she’d seen. I’d wanted to avoid the topic of death altogether. She’d only been back for a few days. I’d wanted our conversations to put her mind at ease, to cool any hurtful visions she’d had.

I looked at her smoking. She looked older although it had only been a few months since I'd last seen her. She had more small lines embedded beside her eyes. They gave her an entirely new look. I wasn't clear what it was, and couldn't really interpret it. I hesitated. I didn't really feel like I could talk about my own life.

"It sounds like a lot of nonsense," I said.

She nodded in agreement, while inhaling her cigarette.

"You know, I smoke now," I said to her, as I looked at the package of cigarettes beside her on the bed.

"You do now, do you? This is new."

"Well, I thought it was time for me to pick up some, you know, more adult-like pursuits."

"I see," she said and passed me a cigarette, even lighting it for me to my surprise.

I hadn't really been thinking of smoking when I'd mentioned adult pastimes, I'd been thinking about sex. It wasn't something we could talk about.

I could feel my mother watching me as I went through my inhalation, dragging the smoke down my throat. I felt sheepish, and couldn't look her back in the eye. I was frightened of something. I could only focus out the window at the waning sun.

I recognised that I wasn't thinking about my mother so much as my own fears. The pattern was being repeated. I didn't want to say anything that would bring up moments of her war experiences. I wanted to say things that disallowed her from feeling pain. When she'd talked about the Korean women, there had

been a hollow echo hammering through me. I had wanted to keep it from her. In that way, she wouldn't know things that would inform her grief. But in another sense, her stories helped me to learn what life was really like. So maybe it was me. The things she told me about seemed too real. It was me who couldn't take in the words, me who read them like they weren't a real story. I wanted them to pass in and out of me like the small pockets of pea soup fog I'd walk through on the beach. I saw briefly into my mother's experiences and then I left them. It's exactly what I'd done with my grandmother. I had a fear of knowing. My mother had only told me about a Korean custom. It had nothing to do with me. My life did not become gnarled simply through hearing stories. I wasn't being asked to go to the moon, but just to listen.

As that picture began to crystallise for me, I put my fear to the back of my mind. I softened the sharp rocks of my mother's narrative into a sheet that I could see. I finished the last puff of my cigarette as the wind whistled through the window casement. My mother was sipping on tea while reading a leaflet about sheep maggots along the lowlands of Wales that she'd found on the bedside table. All I wanted to do was know that she was all right, but maybe that meant that I had to see her, that I had to go through that landscape with her, that I had to float weightless above the war like the Korean kite women.

Somnambulist. It is two days later, or maybe three. Jane lies in the bathtub. Her eyes feel like they are mirrors looking back into her. Her mother: she feels like she cannot possibly spend any more time crying about her mother. All the tears have been drained out of her. And her husband, Graeme. He is still in Korea. Keep him safe, safe, safe, safe, safe.

Outside, through one of the windows, is a downpour. It is raining like transparent sheets of steel. Splashes of it hit the windows. The roof sounds like there are a billion squirrels jumping up and down on top of it. She looks at the purple of the sky, toweringly violet in the storm. The house actually seems like it is swaying under the sky.

Jane brings a cloth up to her face. She leaves it there and feels the warmth against her skin. Nursing and bathing did not seem that different from one another. Both involved knowing the body.

She remembers. There were houses that had been forgotten, houses with no eyes and no fluids that had been dried out and left. They would go into them and make hospitals. When the soldiers came in from the battlefield all muddied and dirty, she would start with the washing. Eyes first, faces, and then necks. A cool, damp cloth on their skin, unearthing them, re-birthing them. They all seemed to be ageless. She was attempting to erase the experience from them. And then she'd fill their bodies with whatever they asked for, usually a cigarette or warm tea held up to their lips. After the wounds were dressed, rounds were made by the ophthalmologist, plastic surgeon, and house surgeon. Each soldier had a record of operations and care hung around his neck.

Jane feels coated in the bathtub. Thick lines in dark and light surround the trunk of her torso. Everywhere thick lines. Even her hands, her wrists, her ankles are thick. Lines wave down her back. The body is fluid, it flows. The empty maw of the house is open to her. She thinks about her dear, drowned mother, her lovely, beautiful mother drowned. What was it that made her do it? Jane does not need to ask. She knows.

She thinks about the long hours she worked at the hospital. Five nights at twelve hours a day was normal. She could feel the exhaustion wrapped around her skin like a dirty old fox fur. Jane remembers it clinging and obsessing on how she could rid herself of the smell. Her unit was only able to bathe once a week, and then only in canvas baths in four inches of lukewarm water.

She looks out the window. The rain comes in black lines. Jane cannot believe she is actually here—in Wales with Thomas and Megan. What she does not understand is how her body is still here, untouched and woundless, having

survived a war.

She has seen things. But not only has she seen, she has felt things flapping and coming through her like a flock of frightened seagulls. It was the soldiers in the recovery ward, the ones on her own side defending Korea from communism and preventing the rest of the world from falling to it. They were the ones who were making the nightmare. Lying in the bathtub surrounded by water, she feels like she is heavy and has sunk to the bottom. But with eyes closed, she sees shimmering before her, the soldiers in recovery whose stories she could not escape.

Jane did not want to hear them. But they could not be contained. She did not have the ability to block them out. She tried to sing a song as she changed bandages, took temperatures and inspected stitches, but a few of the patients had commented on her lips that appeared to be moving out of her control and making different shapes. So she listened to them talking about the refugees in white pyjamas. They were everywhere, wandering across the dusted landscape with its broken, burnt trees. She had seen them also, amazingly stoic even though their feet would have been in agony from the woven straw shoes they wore that barely protected their feet from the hard ground. When they were moving into position, one of the patients was saying, a large number of refugees were walking down the hill towards them. The hill was bare except for the large, craggy boulders strewn on it everywhere and the dust that welled up with every step they took. The refugees were laden down with the characteristic white bundles that marked their permanent journey in search of a new home. The company had continued its move toward them. The refugees were only women

and children, probably peasant farmers, they would continue onwards, in search of shelter, in search of food. As the two groups continued to approach one another, the refugees began running. The long, white shirts of the refugees flowed behind like a large flock of doves suddenly taking flight. More came down, pouring over the hillsides as if it had been carefully orchestrated, drawing themselves into the lines that were made of the approaching soldiers. They were so used to seeing the white pyjamas, walking, standing, rushing through the countryside, that they did not react as the faces of the women and children became clearer. It appeared that something had taken hold of each of them and transformed their slumped walk into something injected with energy and determination. As the refugees continued forward, their eyes almost came into view and displayed something that was not usually there—typically, their eyes were cast downward, avoiding eye contact, but then they seemed to be craving it. And just at that moment, one of the women raised her hand and shouted something on either side of her. Then, with movements into their sacks, under their baggy hanging shirts, they snatched out rifles and machine-guns and began firing on the troops.

“We didn’t know what was happening,” the patient said to the man in the bed beside him. “We just started falling, some guys were hit without knowing it and kept moving forward. We were all open. It was confusing. The sun was so bright and the dust had picked up around all the gooks who were running towards us. That’s when they took out grenades and threw them at us.”

Jane had listened as the soldier talked about their retaliation, opening fire on the women and children and watching them fall. Jane was listening to the

other man's heartbeat, trying to ignore what she was hearing. She tried to concentrate on the steady opening and closing of his ventricles, like the shuddering of an open window during a windstorm as it swung back and forth. She could not help hearing that all of the guerrillas were killed. They would have stopped shooting, the soldier said, if the gooks had, but they continue their attack, running directly into their deaths.

As she continued her rounds—taking temperatures and blood pressures—other soldiers were talking about the refugees in white pyjamas, how they were not refugees but were all guerrillas. It was impossible to know the difference, they said, since all gooks look the same.

That was the first time that Jane heard about the guerrillas. The next time that she encountered them, it was face to face. She was told that some had arrived at the camp. The guerrilla she met was a woman so like herself. She appeared to be the same age, a calm and peaceful look about her face—it was the face of anaesthesia. The woman, the guerrilla, was on an operating table and Jane was assisting the surgeon. The woman's body had been severely burnt by the jellied petrol bombs that they had started dropping on villages. They did not actually know if she was a guerrilla, the surgeon had said, they had probably just suspected that there were guerrillas in the village. Or maybe they had just decided to burn the village to prevent the guerrillas from having a refuge. She could be a guerrilla, or she could just be a villager.

It was the first time that Jane had witnessed what napalm could do. Some of the skin appeared to have melted and healed itself on her legs. It looked like ropes that had formed around her calves, that had emerged along them and that

held her and bound her to the pain of splashed burning gas. Layers of skin on the woman's torso had been burnt and needed to be removed. They would have to peel it off, one sheath at a time, as if the woman's body had become the pages of a book.

Jane believes that there should be two of everything, or two parts to everything. The sky should have the sun and the moon. An object should have a shadow and a light. A hand should have a palm and a fist. A tree should have leaves and branches. A body should have life and more life.

Jane looks at the skin on the tips of her fingers. They are white and ribbed from soaking in the water for too long—like her mother's would have been after her long sleep in the ocean. Jane must get out she thinks. She must write a letter. She is relieved not to be in Korea anymore. She knew it was true. She was useless. There had been a patient on the table. She had dropped the instruments. It was the patient's golden hour—he had not yet been diagnosed, each minute counted. Somehow, they had fallen onto the floor. Another nurse had been there talking to the soldier on the operating table, whispering something into his ear about going home. More instruments were brought in and the operation was successful. He had dozed soundly that night. Jane had walked by him where he slept among the long strings of beds with the other post-ops. His face had looked like that of a statue. It was very beautiful and chiselled, very gentle with curls on his head.

I wanted it to travel down like rain on a black dawn. Dreams of a pregnancy, a woman running across a hill, her body like a black shadow. It was fiercely unsettling when dreams revealed the truth, and dove into innermost thoughts secreted away, told to no one, and resisted. It was like the moment when the sky was unexpectedly covered with thick, dirty cotton, an opaque canopy that masked the blue. And the air had a new rush of coolness when it brushed along the skin. Something that awakened the body to a change. And there was an awareness of the danger that the suddenly cool air brought with it. A warning that something else would come with clenched jaws and lowly uttered snarls. The leaves had become wet and heavy. The scent was unfamiliar and had transformed the atmosphere overnight. There was a rush, a tumble, and a hum to these dreams, begging for release even as they pressed into consciousness and cooled hot aberrations of false reality.

My mother had been there for just over one week before I found myself feeling the panting starting, just before I was supposed to head off to school. I wanted to tell her about it, but knew that I couldn't. I wanted my grandmother's words, "be as you would," to be true. I was squatting on the toilet, the paper in my hand like a thin slice of sandpaper. I felt like a sapling bending in the sun. Except there was no sun, just the glaring light bulb above me and the sheen that it left on the walls. It was the third time that week that I'd found myself there, caught in a sharp cramp, my body swollen, desiring release. I was willing that blood pass out of me into the dulled white of the toilet. I was almost seeing it, the way the first few drops go into the water, then swirl outwards in a kind of ruby smoke. There was something in me that wanted to get out. A pressure. There was over a month of blood inside me that hadn't been able to get out. There was something inside me that kept it in.

A knock at the door. It was Thomas calling to me, "You should know that this is the time for my evening constitutional. It can't wait, and you're younger than me, so you can continue whatever you're doing after I'm finished with the loo." I could hear him pacing about.

I wondered how I could do it. What I wanted to do then was to make myself unpregnant, if that's what had happened to my body. I wanted to flatten myself out like a leaf hanging down, drenched in humidity. Something thin. I couldn't imagine myself pregnant with something nut-sized inside of me. One more minute like that was too much for me with the light and the smooth porcelain bowl obstinately remaining white.

I wondered how it could have been possible in five minutes. Iwan and I

hadn't even turned to each other during it. Afterwards, he'd looked at me with his eyebrows raised and a very slight smile on his face. It was almost as if he was asking me, "How was it?" As if I could know what to say after my first time. The only vision I could bring to mind was the two of us married and me serving him warm housewife meals I'd made. Beef and macaroni casserole, something comforting in the cold weather.

But none of this really mattered to me in the least, because I knew that if it was true, if there was something growing inside me, that it wasn't Iwan who had done it. Could I tell Una? And what would she do?

I could hear Thomas on the other side of the door, clearing his throat and quickening his pacing. I pulled up my underwear very slowly and looked at the dark wood of the door in front of me. Thomas coughed.

I opened the door and felt suddenly small when I saw him standing largely before me with his arms crossed. I felt like I had no business with my thoughts secreted into the toilet, that I was really not all that grown up, that my body was not capable of doing what I thought it had done.

"Sorry Thomas," I said as I bowed my head by him.

"That's fine, Megan me dear," he answered me.

I almost wished that he had patted me on the head.



I thought, as you probably do as well, that there was nothing romantic about operating a farm. A true farmer has no time for running across a windy heath

beneath a slightly blown moon in search of some long lost promise that will expire if his timing is wrong. There is constant running, whether it is to mend another fence that has broken, to tend to sick sheep in the night, to pull a twisted calf out of a cow's womb, or to cull the hay before the heavy fall rains arrive. It is drudgery and toil. That was all that I was beginning to see with the new chores that Thomas had started giving me after school.

The first thing he asked me when he came out of the washroom that evening—after breathing a huge groan of contentment—was if I minded milking the goats before dinner from then on. “It’ll help you when you return to Canada,” he rationalised in response to my doubtful look.

“But we live in the city,” I answered.

“So you understand my logic,” he smiled, passed me the milking bucket, and told me that he was going to get some eggs from the hen house for the supper he was making.

My grandmother had been vague about most things in the last few weeks before she died. She had only given me words and phrases here and there for me to put together, and had alluded to some internal workings that I was meant to stay away from. Words could not explain it to me. Words escaped her, but I knew she was trying to tell me that there was something I must know. I wished she’d had the words to tell me what it was. But one thing, and perhaps the only thing she had been clear on, had to do with a subject relating to Thomas.

“Megan, there is something I must tell you,” she’d said once, as I walked back with her from the barn. I’d listened anxiously, thinking that she was providing me with another clue to solve the enigma that she’d hinted at before.

She turned to me, looking very clearly into my eyes so that there was nothing vague. It was almost as if she'd become another person, that her message was so important, that it required a transformational instant. It was the only moment we ever had like that, and I had understood her perfectly, when she said to me very slowly, "Thomas can't cook worth shit." And just like that, the moment was gone and she returned to her former self, gazing off towards her statues and nodding at the sky.

I remembered her words as Thomas turned away from me with the egg basket in his hands, obviously in a hurry to collect that evening's dinner.

"Thomas?" He turned. "Uh, what's for supper?"

"Cream pancakes. I need six pullets' eggs. Hopefully, the hens have been keeping busy," he went to leave again, with Dewi at his side snuffing at the air.

"Why don't I stay here and get a start on dinner while you go out to get the eggs," I suggested.

"What for?" he questioned, not seeming to take the hint or understand my motives.

"Because Una's dropping by to pick up a dress she needs to borrow, and I don't want to miss her."

"It'll take me but a minute at the hen house. I already have supper planned. I've been thinking about it all day," was his answer. "And you can take the dress out to the barn with you. I'll send her out there, while you're milking the goats."

"To the barn?"

"Sure," and with that he was gone.

It was only when I was halfway across the field to the barn, thinking that I should tell my mother about what was happening to my body, with the dress tucked under my arm and the milk pail swinging, that I realised my grandmother may have prejudiced me against Thomas. His cooking couldn't be that bad. The man was only going to make pancakes. How could someone ruin pancakes?



I was in the barn with both hands on Nelly the goat's teats, squeezing and pulling the thick, fatty milk into the steel pail. I started to believe that maybe there was some truth in what Thomas had said. Milking had a rhythm to it. I didn't have a concrete idea about how this was going to help me when I went back to Canada, but I thought that maybe Thomas had something. Perhaps milking goats would teach me about self-discipline.

I was wrong, that's not what goats taught me, not at all. They taught me far more than that—they taught me about life itself and the hidden mysteries of my body, how it has ebbs and passions, mysterious sprays and breezes, hushes and whispers. They taught me about its sudden, unexpected blooms and its piercing light. My discovery is that there is something romantic about farming.

Una showed up just as I was on my second goat. I hadn't seen her since Guy Fawkes' Day. For some reason, I found it very difficult to speak, to share my ideas and thoughts. I was conscious of my words fitting in the exact correct place in our conversation. I didn't really understand this hesitancy, at least as far as my conversation was concerned. I didn't feel inhibited to look at her eyes

though. They were such indigo, royal, teal, turquoise, and seemed to flare brightly. I continued to milk the goat, but sensed that something had definitely changed. A breeze had touched my face as I secreted myself behind the goat. It was warm and felt like something was flapping against my skin.

Despite the vivacity in Una's eyes, she looked spent and worn.

"I started work at six this morning," she sighed.

"Well, you must be excited about tonight," I said, still with my hands firmly squeezing the sheep teats, but my eyes gazing at her.

"Not really. I'd rather go to bed if the truth be told."

"But it's your engagement party."

"My engagement party. If it were up to me, I wouldn't have one. It's not for me—it's for Iwan's family. Some of them are even coming in from Cardiff."

"Well, you must have wanted to have it at some point," I suggested.

"I suppose I did... I don't know Megan," she said and smiled at me. "Did you bring the dress?"

I motioned towards where it was lying on the hay.

Then Una rubbed her palms together slowly and looked at them as if trying to read words that had been engraved on their surfaces. I thought that if there were any words written there, they would have been: Struggle, Passion, Escape. But I could see none from where I was sitting, only their soft redness. And then, for the first time, those hands that seemed to have a kind of knowledge written onto them, had another kind of knowledge, that of the body of which they were a part. Una's hands very simply began to unbutton her shirt starting from the top and moving downwards until her shirt was off and her

arms were bare. I think that it was the first time that I had seen a person get undressed. I was more shocked than I had been when I felt Iwan entering me in his office. This moment seemed somehow more intimate. And it continued as Una's hands reached down to the lace at the bottom of her camisole, and pulled it up over her head. There was nothing but skin and all of it seemed to be leading directly towards her breasts upon which there were two surprisingly large pink buds. A small shadow hovered beneath them and sank into the line where her ribs met. She continued to undress as if this was something that happened every day. She began taking off her skirt, which was the next logical thing to do, but seemed to me altogether too private. No matter how much I told myself to avert my gaze, I couldn't. Una wiggled out of her skirt, moving her hips from one side to another. Pushing her skirt down like it was nothing and she had done this before. I knew she had, but not with me watching her. It was either that she didn't put on any underwear or she had hooked her thumbs into it so it would slide off with her skirt. Anyhow, the point was that Una now stood there, in front of me, without any consideration as to the possibility of Thomas walking in on her, entirely naked. Light seemed to emanate from her body, casting outwards in fine undulating waves. One beam came from the electric lights hanging down from the ceiling. It caught her directly on her abdomen and elongated itself over her as if it was trying to catch every angle of her body. Her face was illuminated. I couldn't tell the expression on it exactly, it seemed to be caught in something—calm or wonder. The light made her eyes into such vibrancy. She became defined by light. She was on fire. Her presence eclipsed everything. I turned away when she reached for the dress, and began to step into

it. This time I sank into the work of milking the goat. There was something that I didn't want to ruin: my vision of Una with the planets approaching her body aflame. And more than anything, I was wishing that the child—if that's what was within me—was really Una's and mine. So beautiful was she.

The tragedy with me is that I've never learned from my mistakes. I've also never listened to advice or my inner voice. I just plough ahead, as if my actions didn't have any repercussions, as if I had all the time in the world. Why didn't I listen to my grandmother's warning, why did I not guard myself?

With a broad smile on his face, Thomas said, "Cream pancakes are a delightfully popular treat. People ate them at celebrations when I was growing up."

That should have been enough to incite me to action, but I was in no state to cook after seeing Una in the barn. I sat at the table chain-smoking while drinking a pint of bitter. Thomas was too busy cooking to take any notice. So was my mother, who was absorbed in writing a letter to my father.

I should have responded when he said to himself, "Now how does this recipe go again?" But I couldn't. My mind was elsewhere—in Una's milky skin.

“Ah, here it is,” Thomas enthused, holding a grease-stained finger to the recipe. I watched as he read it out while following the directions, “‘Mix together two large spoonfuls of flour, a pint of thick cream, six whole eggs and six egg yolks, and fry in the usual manner.’ Usual manner, eh?”

He looked around him. I saw that that morning’s pan of bacon grease caught his eye. With the spoon that he’d been using to stir the egg mixture, he reached over, took a dollop of the solidified bacon grease, and tapped it loudly into the cast iron skillet. Then he took spoonfuls of the cream pancake mixture and splashed them in.

A while later, my mother and I sat looking at our plates, while Thomas, smiling, passed me some extra cream to pour over the pancakes. What we had on our plates didn’t look like pancakes exactly. Thomas must have added too much liquid, in addition to turning the temperature up too high. The result was boiled pancake fricassee. It looked more like scrambled eggs than pancakes. The thought had occurred to me very briefly that I could refuse to eat it, or claim that I wasn’t feeling well from the bitter. But his face was filled with such a look of gushing pleasure that I couldn’t refuse him the small joy of playing chef. My mother did the same, but like me, insisted that he fill her pint glass.

I dusted my pancakes with sea salt.

“How long have I been here?” my mother asked.

“Over a week,” Thomas answered, as he tried to skewer a pancake.

“It’s Saturday,” I told her, taking another swill of draft.

“It feels like I’ve been here much longer. It’s so quiet here,” she said to Thomas and me.

After she said that, we all paused to listen. The wind pushed against the house. I suddenly felt fatigued. We could hear the floorboards in the upstairs rooms creaking, as if someone was walking along the hallway, wandering from room to room.

“I’m finding it chilly,” she said as she looked into the kitchen, which still had fuzz in the air from Thomas frying the pancakes.

“Here, wrap yourself in this, Jane,” Thomas said, as he passed her a blanket that was on the chair next to him.

Just then, the rain started outside.

I didn’t know what my mother was thinking about. Another person’s mind is like a deep forest with no end to its depth. It must be something like you trying to guess the end of my story before I’m done telling it. Unlike my relationship with my grandmother, I was trying to understand my mother. I looked down at my pancakes, shining with bacon fat. I wanted to do something for my mother. I put my fork down in the middle of the plate while I attempted to swallow another mouthful of the pancake. The house started to move again. The three of us all looked up as we heard another step, a bend in the floor above us. It seemed unreal, but I could feel a pressure on top of us, some kind of stifling feeling. The creaks upstairs moved away and away across the floor, through the bedrooms, and out. I calculated that I was exactly halfway through eating my pancakes. Their undersides were like a chestnut-coloured netting and they had become quite cold.

“Why does it feel like you’ve been here longer than you really have?” I asked. Light from the candle in the middle of the table fell on the wall in a sharp angle.

“This place has the same desolation as Korea—no offence Thomas,” she said, while shooting an apologetic glance in his direction.

“What? What’s that? Sorry, I wasn’t listening. I’m too busy enjoying the pancakes.” He licked his lips.

“I’m so used to the city,” she started again, waving her fork. “I mean, I grew up in London, a metropolis. This place feels very much like Korea. I can’t see any people, but I know that they’re here.”

I had the same feeling. There was an aloneness on Gwyn. I could see that there had been people there for centuries all along the hills and on the fields, their houses connected through strings of stone fences that wound in signals and unsolved patterns across the fields. There was a kind of land loneliness.

“I sometimes had the sensation of being really isolated in Korea,” she continued. “Sometimes when we went into the field, we saw nothing but dusty mountains and valleys that seemed desolate and empty. But then somehow, not much later, we’d be surrounded by people coming from nowhere, maybe from far away, maybe from over a ridge where the troops had just moved into position.”

“Who were those people?” I questioned.

“Often, they were old women or men wearing white pyjamas with their legs sticking out of the bottom of their pants and their feet in shoes and sometimes not.”

“What are white pyjamas?”

“That’s just what we called their clothes,” she answered.

I pictured their legs. They looked like they were covered in the thin paper of a birch tree, streaked and peeling with caked crusts of mud so that each of their legs were like maps that detailed unknown lands. My mother said that without really knowing how it happened, she’d find herself surrounded by forests of these people with blankets, wooden chests, and baskets strapped to their backs. They were all following the beaten down gravel road southwards towards Pusan. Millions of these refugees wandered desperately across the blasted landscape. She said that they all had a look on their faces. It was a kind of pride that had been built into them, and made them look towards that unknown place where they were going. She told us that the strings of people along the roads looked like hundreds of white flags.

“I stood outside the abandoned, tile-roofed boys’ school where we’d set up the casualty clearing station,” she told us from behind the strong beam of the candle. “We watched the faces go by—me and one of the nursing gals, Barb. Some of them caught my eye. There was one woman pulling a cart with her parents on it. She was probably my age, although I always found it difficult to tell. Her parents looked like they were living on the cart, because they were spread out like they were in their own home between four walls. Blankets covered them and were tucked around their heads. They looked like two small children in the way they slept. The woman pulling her parents had a look in her eyes that seemed emptied,” my mother said, calmly.

I imagined this woman's eyes with nothing in them, no history, no registration of letters or words, no way to see how she had been soiled and eroded through the walking that must have seemed like it had been going on for days. I didn't feel calm listening to my mother's story.

I envisioned my mother looking on from the station, wearing white just like the refugees. I pictured Barb also, standing by the edge of the beaten dust road wearing white, the road wearing strings of white bodies. I would have wanted to surrender, I thought, looking at my mother eating her dinner like none of it had ever happened. But there would have been no one to surrender to. My mother hadn't mentioned anything about there being any soldiers. In that case, I would have just surrendered to the land. From my father's letters, I envisioned the mountains rising up like old, dry backs with twisted spines and rib bones that sank and jutted along the skyline. I would have just walked into them and given up, told them that it was over for me. These thoughts came suddenly. My fear falling out of my imagination too easily. Thomas' pancakes oozed onto the plate in a thick paste.

But I was such a mouse. They were not my stories, there was not some danger that was in need of being controlled, that needed to be silenced, that needed to be hidden. Without really thinking about it, I had taken her words and layered them upon myself. But really, they were my mother's. I could have walked out of them at any time. In that moment, I realised that my duty was to let them pass through me.

"Living by the sea is just completely foreign to me. Everything's new. I don't know what to expect," I realised my mother was saying. She paused and

looked into the candle flame, "I had a similar feeling in Korea when we'd be driving along an abandoned road without the strings of refugees wandering southwards. There was so much dust and it would rise behind our convoy. Of course we'd often be in a rush, having received last minute orders to bivouac the hospital at a location closer to where the troops were on patrol. All the dunnage bags would be overstuffed—we'd even have to leave some things behind. It was usually quite a swift departure—the nurses packed the beds and hospital equipment, while the doctors and orderlies packed the operating equipment, dispensary and x-ray equipment." She sighed. "The problem was that most roads would be planted with mines to prevent the jeep ambulance's approach. I'd get so nervous as we drove into the fighting." She held her hand up to her head. "We could hear Bren guns firing across the fields, and grenades exploding. There was always the chance that while we were speeding along those roads, one tire of our ambulance would pass over a mine."

"You're very brave," I told her.

"I didn't feel that brave at the time, that's for sure," she looked out the window.

I stopped the talk and looked out the window towards the sea. The grass appeared to have a smoothness to it, a wonderful wombed layering about it. I nodded to Thomas' reflection in the window when he questioned me, through the look on his face, as to whether or not he could help himself to the pancake that remained on my plate. My mother was still making a gallant effort to eat her dinner by pushing the more crusted parts of the pancakes onto the end of her fork.

I started to think about Una, and how everything had changed. There was nothing more I wanted than to stand in front of the cliffs with her and look out at the ocean, to gaze at that smooth sheet of blue with her by my side and to have that feeling rise out of me. I wanted to look at her while feeling the pleasure deepen, and for her to take me up in the same way, as soon as she saw me. I wanted to write the words, Love Me, in slim lines from the top of my body to the bottom. I wanted her to look at them. Pass Through Me, I would add. I looked out the window and watched as the sky seemed to bend downwards at that moment.

“I wasn’t brave a lot of the time, Megan,” my mother was continuing where we’d left off. “A lot of time was spent waiting. I ate a lot of vanilla ice cream. There was so much waiting. Sitting and standing around. I’d often play cards and cribbage. For some reason, I always ended up with spades. I’d also just go and sit on one of the couches with a bowl of popcorn and have a chat with another one of the nursing gals. Your father was perpetually busy, so I didn’t get to spend much time with him. But one thing I really enjoyed was listening to the troops’ broadcasts with the taped CBC radio programs.”

Listening to her started to become easier, much more so than it had been with my grandmother’s stories. Even the fact that my father was still in Korea wasn’t as horrible as it once had been. For the first time, I didn’t feel afraid of war. I just eased my mind.

Later that evening after her stomach has settled from her father's pancakes, a breeze comes through the window like the water's small rippling waves. The light from the moon blasts through the curtains. Outside, the sky looks so bright and the ocean so dark that she can almost mistake the water for the top of a forest. The waves are small blue hills with clusters of trees. She wonders if that is what her mother's view looked like before she drowned.

She likes spending time in her mother's room. She likes the down blanket that makes her burn with a thin net of heat. On the dresser is an antique typewriter with round keys. It is very heavy and makes characters in partial shadow—everything that she typed had small ghosts on it. She tried to type him letters on it, but then gave up because it took too long.

She is so sure she is asleep, that this is a dream. In the dream, she is looking down at the beautiful view. The landscape outside is a smooth purple.

Purple sea, purple fields, purple grass. She asks the boy if he thinks that it is purple also. He nods, takes a syringe, and injects blood into her arm, pushing down with the indwelling needle.

The sky in Korea. A sky without stars. Even it was under orders to black out during the night. There was only the sound of explosions. The skin of her throat had actually quivered when she was standing in the casualty clearing station autoclaving the instruments, waiting for the injured to arrive. A small bird fluttering just inside, on the larynx. It was something that she had to get used to. It was like not being able to get over a cold. Even when there were no explosions, she thought that there was still a tremor there. An involuntary spasm.

Order always helped. Organising and cleaning the instruments until everything was so sanitised that she did not even want to touch it. Then she would place one thing beside the other, perfectly spaced, so that every table looked the same and the instruments looked new. She tried not to think of the stomach wounds and amputations that would take place in a few hours. They would often lose a patient who could not stand the trauma of the amputation of one of his arms.

“Why don’t you try to get a little rest?” her unit leader had suggested after a dinner of hardtack and sweet, thick army tea when she had come in and seen Jane polishing and sanitising. “It’s probably going to be another long night.”

But sleep seemed so impossible most times when she tried it. Afternoons especially found nothing. The quarters that she and Graeme shared was a small

tent. Its green sides were thick and smelled heavily of must, dampness, and the smoky soot that would cover everything when they put on the heater. They slept in eiderdown bedrolls. It was so dark and there were no windows for her to gaze out of. What did she think of when she was there? The year of solitude that would be lived in this place and the orange colours of fall at home. She would watch the stubble on his face as he slept. His face had aged, but was still beautiful. She looked at it so closely at times that it felt like she was climbing onto his face. Once there, she was caught on the forest that was his beard, walked through bristled trees and became lost.

Her mother is dead. Dead means that she is no more, her body does not exist above ground. It is encased in a thin wooden box beneath the ground and is surrounded by dark earth. What made her die? Jane wants to ask her mother this, she wants to take her. So she does, drawing her up out of the grave, out of the coffin. Her mother is there, rebuilt and whole, alive again, and smiling. She is alive but she is like she had been when Jane saw her before she left for Korea. There had been something different. Jane had looked into her mother's eyes, and there had been something else there. Her mother's eyes had absorbed light, took it in, and swallowed it.

What was it? What was that sound? She turns around. She hears a stirring somewhere in the corner where the roof slopes downwards and then disappears into the floor. The sound of a single piece of paper glued to a wall and then the wind lifting up the edges. Her eyes scan the wall for paper. There is none. What is it, that sound? One of her letters? No letters anywhere, no letters.

It was the blitzkrieg that drove her mother away from the city. Not knowing if she would be alive in the morning, or being woken in the night from the sound of sirens. Then running to the Underground with their panic bag—the family’s silver goblets. The narrow mouth of Euston Station pursed and almost unwilling to take them both in. Voices closing in around them, hundreds of voices, each with the hot breath of worry. There would have been bombs going off overhead and the earth would have shook. Her mother would have arisen, shaken, out of that hole, feeling dead.

Jane knows that Gwyn was much different than that. She did not feel dead. When Jane saw her before she left for Korea, Gwyn seemed almost in ecstasy in the way she was watching the sky floating above them in a black sheet. Jane had wanted to ask her mother things, like how to capture that sky and keep it forever inside her, and how to take all the images of her life and turn them into something that she could see regularly. Jane believes that her mother was very alive the last time she saw her. The awakening was rolling through her.

Where is her mother’s body? Life is something so delicate, so delicate. It is not her husband she thinks about when she thinks of bodies, nor his neck that she would take into her mouth. She does not think of Graeme when she thinks of bodies, she thinks of the bombing at Inchon and the field ambulance’s dispatch there.

They were the first to arrive after a call from the ground troops in their hill positions. They were flown in by helicopter over the mountains, rusted into yellows and reds from the cool fall nights. The ambulance convoy swept into a smouldering shaft of smoke that was emanating from some houses. The village

was supposed to be a thousand years old. It had been bombed by mistake. Jane noticed that they were not really houses so much as walls that were standing without roofs. Some were only made up of a single wall. The rest was crumbled into pieces of wood and tile. When she stepped out, the air had been thick with rain. It fell in hard pills onto the ground. The ambulance team, led by military escorts, walked through the mud puddles to the burning holes of buildings. Jane carried a case of syringes, gauze, and thick pads under the camouflage rain gear she was wearing. Others were carrying a few stretchers so that the wounded could be flown out to the hospitals, as well as canteens of water for fluid intake. But as they walked into the village with its burning dust withdrawing the light from the sky, they could not see anyone. There was the smell of wet wood in the rain and nothing else. They continued walking inwards, towards the centre of the small village where the mud seemed to run into black. They continued on inwards, looking for survivors. They did not find anybody. No signs that people had lived there, been there, or were wounded. A false alarm. It must have become a ghost town in a matter of minutes. Most of all, he wasn't there, the boy.

That is what she is doing now, putting him back together in a way that will make him here forever. She is drawing him out of the sea, allowing one limb to float into the other. Watching him become whole directly in front of her. Without shadows on his face, he is awake this time through lines laid out under the hard pressure of her mind. Jane is making waves into the boy's face and a heart-shaped forehead with a sculpted widow's peak. And when she weeps, a pale shadow becomes a part of him. She can barely see him, so no one else must

be able to either. But she needs everyone to see him—Megan, Thomas, Graeme (the bastard—don't call him that), the neighbours, anyone.

Jane hears a voice speaking to her. It is the voice of this boy again. He is whispering something. His voice is filled with child's speech. She saw him when she arrived in Korea. Younger than most. He had that smooth skin without breaks in it, no lines, no indents, like it was not real.

She is waiting for something—a mover, an eye, a door, a voice, jam, spine, a sudden vibration, the tock of footsteps. Jane realises that her eyes are full of visions. It feels similar to how she felt when she gave birth to Megan. So happy, so utterly happy. It is like an arousing, it makes her feel alive. But the problem is she almost feels too much now, too awake. She spends most nights staring out the lace curtains in her bedroom, and watching the moon as it climbs along the wooden floor. Or she watches the tiny holes in the curtains. Their centres are black, and the space around them glows like the sky. Sometimes she walks slowly and noiselessly, drawing the moon toward her with wide arms. She can feel something beating inside her. Holding it inside her is like being held by a warm sun. It burns through. She is so much like Gwyn.

Well, I don't really know what you think about the way I've been telling this story. To me, it seems quite clear, and I hope that you're able to understand it. I know that you probably haven't liked everything I've said. But this is all that I can offer, and I'm trying to go slowly. Of course, I realise that life's far too short not to be getting to the heart of this account. I just wanted you to know that the way I've been telling this story is part of its expression. Everything I've said and the words that you've heard in passing—all are elements of who I am. Even those anecdotes that seem like pure vanity or drivel. Look on them as you do all of my narrative, and you will be able to learn about the stuff you are looking for. It's not an easy tale to tell. I hope you realise that.



Thomas had grease pumping through his veins. He was sure it took up half his body weight. He told me that it was passed onto him. The ancient Welsh had used grease to coat their skin on cold winter days. They had worked it into the chaps on their arms and sealed the cracks in their hands against drafts and gusts. When I looked at Thomas' face, I saw that it had a certain sheen to it, especially in the mornings when he'd come in for breakfast—the sun seemed to reflect off his cheeks like they were water, they had a shine, and his wrinkles had small ripples and waves.

But I thought any excess grease in his body was more likely to come from our diet. My tragic error where cooking was concerned, was that I was perpetually late helping Thomas to plan meals. I would be off thinking about Una, or in the water closet wanting to bleed, or listening to my mother's experiences from the war, looking for more papers with circles on them, or trying to remember the words my grandmother had told me—"be what you want"—was that it? Every time I realised that Thomas must have started on that day's breakfast or dinner, I was too late, so absorbed in other issues was I. And then I'd arrive to witness something sizzling. We ate toast fried in bacon fat every morning. He made it in a black cast iron pan that he always drained the excess bacon grease into. Fried toast wasn't as easy to make as I thought, the grease had to be at the temperature just before it started to smoke, so that when the toast was put in, bubbles swam off it. The sound of frying toast was the sound of rain as it hit a warm roof. I'd usually wake up because Thomas was shifting the pans or the kettle on the stove and the sound rang through my room like an old bell. Then the field at the end of my bed would stretch away and so

would dreams of my afternoons in the barn with Una. When I woke up, I often felt like a woman. I had a woman's head and a woman's body. I thought that's what a woman was, someone who is happy with her body, someone who allows it to be touched by another. But as soon as I was awake, my mind was working: what was my body doing? was two weeks really all that late for my period?

The dresses I wore to school were very tight on top, but swelled out on the bottom. They were billowy and made me feel like I could have concealed another person beneath them. But I was beginning to feel that wasn't the place I needed to conceal—my abdomen was open and vulnerable. I had bought those dresses at Simpson's before I left, along with short sleeve blouses, and a few jumpers. When I came home from school, I would change into pedal pushers, even though it was becoming winter. I wasn't really seeing anyone besides Una, and she didn't seem to be too occupied by what I wore. Thomas, with his ten to thirteen hour days, didn't seem to care what he looked like either. He always wore green or blue work pants with a bright red thermal undershirt. The sleeves were rolled past his elbows, because he was usually fixing or building something. He had the same intensity on his face when he fried our eggs—he hovered over the pan with the spatula as if the timing of the eggs was crucial. It was, I suppose, because he always had them served a few minutes after I came out of my room. We often ate at the small table while my mother slept in. Every morning he told me something different. He would often open the window while he talked and smell the breeze, noting if he thought it would rain.



“Your grandmother should have died in her bed instead of on the beach at night,” he said, while he broke the yoke and spread it over his fried toast. “She was so lovely. I should never have let her venture out alone. I can’t even remember the last thing we talked about,” he continued as he put the yellowed toast into his mouth.

“I don’t think that matters, Thomas,” I said. “I can’t remember every single conversation that I’ve had in my life.” I stroked back the nap on Dewi’s head.

“She was still so young. Her life was taken away from her when she was in her prime,” he told me with his mouth still full—it was a habit of his.

“Well, I know that sixty-six is young, but at least she had a long life.”

“Long life... You call that long? That’s just starting out as far as I’m concerned.”

“How long do you want to live then, Thomas?”

“One hundred and four and a half seems about right to me,” he sniffed.

“That’s perfectly fine if your health is good,” I said, just as I realised that my breasts were feeling tender and swollen. “But what if it’s not?”

He only responded with the sound of his chewing.

“And why do you think that Grandmother’s life was taken away?” I pressed.

“What do you mean?” he turned to me, actually stopping his chewing.

“I mean, no one’s really talked about it. There were no police involved.”

“Police? Why should there be police?” He gestured vaguely towards the icebox, which had a white crown of paper extending over every edge of it.

“Well, we don’t really know what happened to her. No one else saw her, no one was there.”

“Megan, you know exactly what happened to her. She was walking along the beach, and must have gotten tired or fainted or something like that. When the tide came, she just didn’t wake up. That’s all,” Thomas announced. “It happens. You’re just not seeing things the way they really were, the only way they could be. You’re seeing them like...like you’re Canadian or something.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean you’re trying to fit your grandmother’s death into a little box. She’s not going to fit into it. There’s not an answer for everything.

“It’s like when I discovered I wanted to be a sheep farmer. It happened one afternoon when my father came home from work in the fields. He found me in the barn, pausing before I fed the pigs. I held a bucket by its handle in one hand. The pigs had all gathered at the trough, snouts tilted into the air, waiting. My father saw me looking up at a hole in the upper part of the barn wall that was in bad need of repair. He thought that I was thinking of what materials were needed, the nails and boards—the wood required treatment before it was set in place, without it the lowlands rain could take apart a barn almost as soon as it was put up. After he stood watching me for a moment, my father said something like, “It’ll take at least a half day to look after fixing that hole.” I said back to him that I hadn’t thought about it. When he asked me what I’d been looking at, I waved my hand just above me towards the hole in the barn. My father shifted

his study to the area where I'd been gesturing. There was an old rig, unused for years, with hay piled on the back of it. Several useless wooden ploughs lay in a heap in front of it with broken, snapped blades. There was a scythe bent out of shape by young Dutch clover, rye grass, trefoil, lucerne, and sainfoin that had obviously been too fresh for cutting. My father asked me what I was looking at. I gestured in front of me again. "Don't you see them?" I asked him. Noticing the look of doubt on his face, I told him to squat or kneel on the floor and to look directly into the light. My father did this. What he saw was a dust storm in the barn. I thought these particles looked like minuscule sheep, because each seemed to have four legs, and were covered in coats. The air, which had looked like it was clear before, was actually filled with weightless sheep. In the light, it seemed that they were walking around me, caught in a herd about my head. My father sat there with me for a while seemingly looking at the barn boards, badly in need of repair, but neither of our gazes actually reached that far—we both had flocks of sheep passing by our eyes. "That's a way of looking at life," my father had told me. Thomas broke off.

I paused for a long while. "That's a very interesting story, Thomas," I said, "but what does it have to do with Grandmother's death?"

"What does it what?" he snorted, as he folded a piece of bacon back and forth onto his fork. It looked like a rubber accordion and sounded like one in the way he was chewing it with his mouth open.

"We were talking about Grandmother, the police, remember?"

"Oh, right," he answered. "I've no idea where I was going with that one."

"Come on, Thomas."

“Okay,” he started. “I suppose I was trying to say that you’re not seeing your grandmother’s death for what it was.” He raised his eyebrows then, and woke up slightly.

“Which was?”

“An acc-i-dent,” he answered, and picked up the bacon fat he had sliced off and put it in his mouth. “I know that it was an accident, Maayguun.” He pointed the blade of his knife towards himself, jabbing it just slightly at his chest.

“Fine, Thomas. All right,” I shuddered.

He tried to laugh a little, while reaching for the tea.

I had already decided that I wouldn’t push the issue with him any further. He needed to take comfort in something, and if that meant not exploring her death, then that was the way it would have to be for him. As for myself, I still found it calling to me through the strange chuckling of the ocean. Perhaps it was the same for Thomas, except he was ignoring it by thinking about sheep, and doing projects on the farm.

What had happened that night to my grandmother? The day of her death, I’d had a light morning’s conversation with her about the chances of her finding a conch shell. Why would my grandmother fall asleep on the beach? If she had been tired, it would have made much more sense for her to take a nap up in the house like she often did. No one had seemed to doubt it at her funeral, no one had told me anything that had made me suspect. Was that a normal way for people in Wales to expire? To fall asleep on a beach and be swept off onto the ocean? My mother hadn’t seemed to think that anything was amiss either. Nor

my father in his letters. Anyhow, he was so focussed on where he was, on resisting Russian communism. Perhaps it was just me who suspected something. My blasphemy and me.

I think you'll agree with me when I state that there is no one in existence, woman or man, who is not interested or the least bit curious as to how two women make love to each other. Not that I am an expert in the field, but I can tell you what I know if you're so inclined. Or if you just want to listen. Or if you just want to eavesdrop. It is a subject that holds the world breathless. Men will fall on their knees, capitulate, have to remain seated and hidden behind a table top at the mere mention of two women sequestered together, alone and brooding over their ladylike concerns.

I should let you know that I have always succumbed to the irresistible charms of my own sex. Too easily, I might add. It's the openness of a woman revealing her inner self that I've always found arresting. It's like some kind of wonderful confession, always rich and full of her self-doubt. Sometimes, it's almost an apology of sorts. An intimate disclosure about a subject for which she

feels shame, and about which she hasn't been able to breathe a word, not one. It is the revelation of her inmost thoughts that she has never had the caring ear into which to pour her concerns—until she falls with the company of another woman, that is.

It is that moment, that beautiful moment for which I live. Never underestimate the erogenous power of the human ear. How a revelation plays against the tympanic membrane, and how the sound waves against the malleus, the incus, and the stapes. Then how it becomes embraced by the labyrinth, extending to the nerves. A woman's voice speaking in hushed tones, whispers, susurrations, and murmurs is enough to stop time altogether. The soft parting of the lips that is barely audible, and the slight intake of breath. A clearing of the throat. The wetting of the lips. And then those words spilling, and how they do—gushing outwards, rising upwards, rolling inwards, pushing onwards, and bringing me towards a moment of intimacy.

After the telling, the sentence or word that has been held back is released and liberated, no longer secreted and withheld, and there is calmness. A woman always displays any serenity she feels in her eyes. It's the first place I look after a conversation that has been heated with worries. In the eyes is the seat of enchantment. Almost always, a new glimmer emerges in them. It is not on the surface, it cannot be seen very simply either. The eyes must be gazed into, and deeply. This, of course, can be very difficult to do, because the experience is usually too overpowering. For a woman, while looking into the eyes of another woman, can find that her heart is sent beating off into another world, she can find that it bursts from pure rapture. Here is how it can be done safely: take

cursory glances across the eyes of the woman who is confessing to you. Quickly, back and forth in uninterrupted smooth passes. Pretend that you are noticing something in the background behind her, the time, a passerby. And then hold yourself, and move your eyes to her, something she is wearing, some jewellery, a necklace, her top, all the while making smooth glances towards her eyes. The next part is the most difficult, because all caution must be thrown aside. In order to see how her confession has touched her, her eyes must be looked into fully, her eyes must be locked onto. But hopefully, it will not send you into shock, as you have glanced at them before, just along the edges. So then take her, take her after her lips have stopped speaking, take her just after she has paused. Prepare for it, prepare for the moment that she looks up at you, and go into her eyes. Climb into them, feel them, feel their release, feel their wetness. Go into the storm, go through their waves of colour and light, go through their rays flashing outwards, go in them. And then see her relief, the moment after the telling is done. See it in her eyes, the way they are purged of the weight that used to press onto them, see a clarity that wasn't there before, see a glimmer that is full and open. That is perhaps the loveliest and most charming moment that can happen between two women, when they are together, alone, out of earshot, and one has just finished telling and the other has just finished listening.

There is something else that happens between women, beyond the confession, beyond words—it is touching. It is a fact that all women love touching each other. This point is true and indisputable. No woman will deny it. And who can resist it? I have always found that I submit without resistance to the natural softness that women possess. It is as if their skin has been lightly

powdered by some power in the cosmos. Women's skin is a smooth cream, a rich tincture of delicacy that must be touched and touched again.

Very soon after two women make each other's acquaintance, they will have no hesitation in embracing one another. It happens without a thought, it is natural. They will do it upon greeting one another and then upon departure. After some time has passed, they will hold onto each other longer. It is a sign of their friendship, this physical bond. They will wrap their arms around each other. They will hold each other strongly, each waiting for the other to let go first. This is an intimacy that I love. A beautiful intimacy. A coming together that is so open. And it must be had for both women. If it is not, it signals that there is a fault in the friendship, a change, a coldness.

Gradually, two women will move on with their touching. In addition to the rendezvous and farewells, they grow more comfortable touching each other during a visit. One will pass a spoon for the other to stir her tea, and reach out and lay a hand casually upon an arm. They will be sitting side by side watching television, and then one will lay her head on the shoulder of the other. They will be walking through a light rain shower on a cloudy afternoon, and one will link her wrist into the arm of the other.

As this goes on, something else will arise—laughter, and much of it. It will often begin with a scenario about which there is nothing particularly funny. A sentence that comes out all wrong, a piece of food caught in a tooth, a hilarious person walking on the street about which there doesn't seem to be anything funny on the surface. But there is something unmistakably absurd about the person, and about all these other things. Neither of these women can

define it. They don't understand it. After all, it only happens when they're in each other's company and no one else's. It is that they can open up together, that they view everything differently together. It is all new, it is all magical. A wondrous exploration of oneself.

For knowing another woman is like knowing oneself. Touching another woman is like touching oneself. How mysterious that is—to know oneself so well, to be able to reach out and touch her, to feel her body against one's own, to feel the words as she speaks them. Oh yes, wonderful. Wonderful knowledge. Full. And what is the logical progression from here? Where does one go when one has oneself in her very own possession? Does she not love herself? Does she not feel passion for herself? What will she not do? There is skin, there is laughter, and there are lips. Looking into a mirror, gazing into it, what does one feel? Like kissing the image? Like kissing the beauty staring back from the glass? The beautiful open woman in the glass.

So kiss it. And she will. One of them. One of the two women. It will happen. There is no doubt about that. No woman will deny that absolute truth, that absolute desire to kiss herself, and to feel herself kissed. Given the opportunity, no woman can resist the temptation, the desire to kiss the nearest part of herself. To touch those lips, and to be touched by them. Yes, no woman will ever resist the opportunity to kiss another woman. It is the absolute truth.

But it is the conditions that must be right. And these are difficult to come by. The beautiful ones often stay removed in their rooms, spending their time writing letters or reading books; writing books and reading letters. Too busy thinking rather than kissing—which is where they should be. Women are meant

to be kissed, and kissed properly. To meet a woman is difficult. To meet a woman that you love and who loves you is even more difficult. It happens, but it is rare.

I met a woman. Once.



Don't speak to me about love. I have known love. And passion. I have gone through that nightmare.

How did it happen? I didn't know. I still don't. Love is one of those inexplicable mysteries. It often involves getting to know a person, speaking and spending time. But there is something else also. The thing that is the most powerful element of the relationship, the thing that will make it last or make it end. I don't have a word for it. I only know when it's there and when it's not. It is the feeling or aura about another person. Some call it love.

But being in love is another matter altogether. It is a terrifying experience. The first time I felt it, I knew what it was. There are endless amounts of literature on the subject, poetry and music, paintings and prints. Typically, the focus and the subject is a woman, starry-eyed and dazzled with her eyelids half-batted, gazing upon her beloved. Why art has traditionally depicted women in love, I have no idea. Some of the greatest lovers in history have been men: gentle, slow men who understand women's bodies, gallant men upon horses wielding swords, walking above clouds, men in castles and palaces with a train of servants, riding in gilt carriages. But women, for some reason, have

never been depicted with these accoutrements. They come in simple dresses or cloaks wearing a modest pair of shoes or no shoes at all. They are often alone, independent of the world and its impressions, not noticing what is surrounding them, not carrying it with them. They move alone through forests, along hillsides, and city streets. They carry nothing with them, no symbols, nothing to signal their emotions. It is undeniably these women, the thousands and thousands of them throughout history, who have represented love. And why women? The answer is simple: everyone, woman or man, needs to look at pictures of women in love.

How then, has their in-loveness been portrayed? Through the eyes of course, through the eyes. A woman who is in love has a look about her, a look outwards from beneath her eyelashes. It is obvious, it permeates, it showers, it resonates. It is so very visible that the artists of the world have only had to portray women in love through the look in their eyes. And that is all. Everything else extends from that point, love in its entirety moves outwards from the eyes.

How in love was I?

I was so in love that after washing my hair at night-time, it would swell in round curls even while it was still wet, where before it had remained quite straight until it was completely dry. I would hum the tunes along with the big bands that Thomas listened to on the BBC after dinner while I was doing the washing up. I relished Thomas' cooking with a new vigour that hadn't existed before. I didn't complain to myself about having to herd the sheep into the barn in the early evenings. I listened to my mother's stories of the war with interest and attention, without being afraid of the repercussions of her words. I replied

to my father's notes of inquiry about how my mother was doing with enthusiasm, and included long descriptions of my life on the farm. I felt like I had become taller, that being in love had caused a growth spurt because most things that I looked upon seemed smaller and not as important as they had before. My breasts felt bigger and fuller, the curve of my hips more pronounced, and my throat and collarbone more distinguished. Being in love made me grow into my sex so that I felt like a mature woman. Although I continued to wear pedal pushers, I now wore my blouses with more of their buttons undone so that my milky chest was exposed. I was so in love that for the first time ever, I enjoyed wearing a brassiere. I would look at myself in the mirror in the mornings after I put it on and run my fingers up and down the satin of its straps. Because I was in love, I decided that I wouldn't have to become a nurse like my mother, or a teacher like Iwan. I would become a singer with long, black gloves and I would even appear on television in the spotlight, and walk along the stage and smile for the whole world to see. Being in love made me feel absolved from finishing the end of my sentences. To my mother I would say: "Tell me more about the..." or "Is your letter for...." To Thomas I would say: "The sheep have..." or "What time is...." All my thoughts revolved around love, and I soon stopped tidying my room. There were clothes strewn on the floor forming a lush carpet, hardback books lay open at passages that I found compelling, and mugs, glasses, and half-filled ashtrays dotted the bureau and bedside table. The entire room was crowding on top of me, piles of these things threatened to tumble down at every moment. I felt for the first time that I was taken, perhaps like in marriage, but more so even, because not a moment of the day passed that

I didn't think about how I was no longer alone, I was possessed. Being in love made me devour arias on the radio with sweet, insatiable hunger. I found that I had an uncontrollable desire to eat cheese. After Thomas left in the morning following breakfast, and if my mother wasn't yet up and going about her day of writing letters to my father, I'd rush to the icebox and slice off thick pieces of cheddar, pressing them into my mouth before I even walked away. I was so in love that life didn't seem so heavy to me. I wasn't bogged down by thoughts, by fears. I began to accept that my grandmother had been taken away by the sea, because she'd inadvertently taken a nap before the tide had come in. I didn't worry about my mother when she told me stories from the Korean War, and believed that I was helping her to purge herself of anything unpleasant that lingered from her experiences. I didn't concern myself with my father, because his letters confirmed that he was committed to what he was doing and believed he was saving the world. I decided that I had confused the date of my last period and that it really wasn't all that late. Besides, there'd been so much stress in my life that I probably wasn't going to get it until things settled down. I was so in love that I began to stroke my stomach under my blouse when I was alone. I really loved my body for the first time. I would extend my fingers under my blouse or into my pants and brush them back and forth, feeling the smooth convex of my abdomen and the soft imprint of my navel. Being in love made me pay more attention to my fingernails. I would spend a few minutes after doing the dishes pushing my cuticles back, and making sure they always had a clean pinkness to them. I spent even more time in the bathtub at night smoothing the rough skin of my feet with a pumice stone. I would rub my mother's face cream

into them after I was out of the bath. I shaved my legs for the first time. I used Thomas' shaving kit. I didn't want to use my mother's electric razor, because I didn't want her to know that I'd shaved my legs. The feeling of being in love made me want to go to university for the first time. Perhaps I would go to Oxford or Cambridge. I would study history, I could get a degree in the history of Love. Being in love made me search for words, and when they came up, I had no idea where they'd come from, words like seditious, recondite, and orgasmic. I decided that I could have anything I wanted if I put all my effort into it. I could have the person I wanted if that was the only thing I concentrated and focussed on. Being in love made me want to spend all my time with my lover. When I woke up in the morning, that was my first thought, my only goal for the day. Loving my lover made me care about other people—people I saw if we went to town, our neighbours if they came by, people I read about in the newspaper, people who were close to me. Everyone had a new aura. I was so in love that I needed to walk. I would go in the late afternoon as soon as my chores were finished. At first I tried walking along the road, but on the rare occasion that a car came by, I'd have to stop and chat, make up a story about where I was going, and even accept a lift. I had told Iwan's mother, Margaret Williams, that I was examining the heath flowers for a biology project; Jude Davies that Thomas had sent me on an errand to buy some hard cheese, at which point Jude had insisted on driving me to the shops, where I discovered that I only had twenty-five pence, and Jude being the perfect gentleman not only offered to pay the balance but insisted on driving me back to Bury Green; Hortense Howell, one of the girls in my class who was riding her bike to her piano lesson, that I'd gotten lost

on the fields on my way back from school; and Joseph and Julie, the Wynn-Ellis twins, who were accompanied by their minder, Vala Pritchard, that I was feeling homesick and thought I'd walk back to Canada. Then I tried walking along the field, but found that I'd often run into Thomas who would want to discuss that evening's meal, and in particular, a dish known as faggots, for which he couldn't locate my grandmother's old recipe, but which he was sure contained belly pork and pig's liver. So eventually I ended up taking my walk along the beach on my grandmother's old haunt, as I found it the only place where I could release my passion to the waves that turned over and over in front of me. Being in love made me feel like a real person, and every time I walked past a mirror I would say, "Megan Evans." Of course not out loud, but I would say it in my head. "Megan Evans, Megan Evans, Megan Evans." Like that. And it felt good, because I would look back in the mirror, and think, "Yes." And I would nod at myself.

And what about my lover?

"Are you in love with me, Una?" I asked her, because I couldn't not ask it. I wanted to know even though I could see that it was there in her eyes when she would look at me. They were such clear blue eyes. So perfect. An ocean perfect blue like no one else throughout the history of the planet.

In response, she moved her body on top of mine as we lay in the hay of the barn's loft. "Life. Sweet Dip. Sunshine," she whispered in my ear. These were all names that she had given me each time we met. I got to be a different person every day.

“I will go to the moon with you,” she told me, touching my cheek with the tips of her fingers. “I will go anywhere in the world with you. All you have to do is to tell me where to meet. And I don’t care what anyone thinks, or what anyone says. I will always be with you.

“You know what we should do, Megan? We should leave this place. You and me. We should do it. We could just say that we’re going on a little day trip to Cardiff to see my cousins. We could get money somehow. I could take it from the pastie shop or you could get some from your grandfather. I know the old bloke loves you. Hey, you can even say that it’s for your marriage! Your engagement—imagine that!

“I mean, I don’t want to stay in this bloody place my whole life. I’m young. What’s there to do here? I’ll end up rolling dough my entire life. I’ll end up with eleven kids, that’s what. There’s more to life than that, eh Meg? I want to travel like you. I want to see some of the world. Say, maybe I’ll even go back to Canada with you. We could get a little log cabin in the woods and fish for supper every day.

“And then I can talk like you, right? Say stuff like ‘cool,’ and ‘daddy-o,’ and ‘the most.’ All that kind of thing. After a few months, no one would know that I had a Welsh accent, would they?

“We could really pamper ourselves then. Go shopping in one of the big cities, go to Montreal. You know what I’d buy? Silk stockings...and not the cheap kind either. I’d buy me some real silk stockings instead of wearing these bloody old things. Wool tights. Ugh! I feel like an ogre in these things.

“And you know what else I’d do? I’d go to college. Yeah. I’d go to college and learn how to type. I’d learn shorthand too. I’d get a respectable position. Imagine being a real secretary? At a big company also. I wouldn’t want any small job. Some place where they have marble ashtrays on the corner of every desk. Then I’d get some patent leather pumps, and some white gloves to wear to work. And then I could wave to people as I got on the tram, just like Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret. And I could smile and be friendly and love my life...because every night I’d know I’d be coming home to you.

“And then we could make supper together. I’ll have picked up the pasties, and maybe you could make a soup. Or I know what, Megan. We could go out. Out on the town to a fancy restaurant. We could have a roast, or even some wild game that the restaurant owner hunted for himself in the forest. There’d be an orchestra there, or I suppose it would be a quartet rather. They’d play something really lovely just for us, and we’d hold hands and look on. It would feel so good just sitting there and really belonging to each other.

“And then we’d go back to our house. No, actually, we wouldn’t have a house. Who wants land? It just means that there’s more work to be done. We’d have an apartment, but a fancy one with a fireplace, stained glass windows, and even a dumbwaiter so we’d just have to ring when we wanted tea and we wouldn’t have any work to do. But it would be a real home—our own! And when we walked by the doorman, he’d say, ‘Good afternoon, Miss Wynn-Ellis. Good afternoon, Miss Evans.’ And I’d say something like, ‘Good afternoon, William.’ And you’d say something like, ‘William, would you please send this afternoon’s papers up to us, along with a package of cigarettes?’ And he’d say, ‘Very good,

madam.’ And he’d bow just slightly at you, Megan. Imagine that—being bowed to.

“Maybe I’d be a dancer in a fancy night club. Wouldn’t that be a change from making pasties? No more, ‘Una, clean the floor,’ or ‘Una, there’s a customer at the front who needs tending to.’ I’d be a real lady then. Hey, I’d even wear a tiara. Why not? Just a very simple one, not too big or showy. Then when I was feeling modest, I could tuck a piece of chiffon under it and let it cover my face. And then people walking by would be really curious, and if someone caught a glance of me, they’d whisper to themselves, ‘I think that’s the famous singer, Una Wynn-Ellis.’ But I wouldn’t really care about all that. It’s fun to dream though, isn’t it Meg? I’d be happy just wearing, plain sensible clothing, really I would. As long as I could wear something different every day. I hate just having one of everything. A lady always has a proper change of clothes for each day of the week.

“But you know, none of that really matters. My body is a lady’s. You’ve told me that I’m the most beautiful woman on the earth. Now that’s something real, not all this dreaming. I only have to measure myself against my own yardstick and not those of others.

“The thing is, I don’t want to end up like Mother and Dad, just doing the same thing day after day, living in this bloody, godforsaken place for the rest of my life, working my hands to the bone until there’s nothing left of me but bone. I like working, it’s not that. It’s just that I feel trapped here.”

Our times together were joyous. We'd play games. I'd hide from her. The afternoon of that conversation, I'd entered the upper part of the barn to get some hay, and heard someone open the door in the floor below. I knew it wasn't Thomas because he was making baked trout with oatmeal for dinner, and he told me that coating the fish in oatmeal was a very delicate operation that would require his constant attention. I didn't like to think about it, because I'd begun to feel nauseous quite frequently. I supposed that the salt air had weakened my stomach. Anyhow, the person was walking to the side of the barn where lengths of shorn sheep's wool were being stored until Thomas could find a buyer for them. At that moment, I half stood up. When I peaked over the edge of the hay, I saw the very soft flesh on the fine slope at the back of Una's neck.

I squatted down again. I couldn't believe that it was possible that Una continued to feel something for me, that she continued to walk that distance after a long day at her job, that she came to me every day to confess her love for me. I looked over the bails of hay again and I could see her looking for me in the barn with a package tied up in newspaper that must have been some of the bakery's unsold goods. She walked over to the pile of sheep's wool and put her package down. She stood there for some time, looking around. One of the goats stomped impatiently. There was the sound of a barn swallow flapping its wings in the upper rafters. What I was feeling then was something far greater than what I had felt during my encounter with Iwan. My heart was climbing around the inside of my body. I thought that I could feel a heat around me.

Somehow, she went into the loft and found me there. There was kissing, the laying of hands on faces. Then Una had lain down on a blanket that she had

spread over the hay. She took off her jacket, and undid the buttons in her blouse. I must have looked the same as I did every day with my pedal pushers and a sweater on to keep the afternoon chills away, except for the fact that she was now removing my clothes piece by piece as I was hers. Una climbed onto me, naked. One of her legs between mine. Her other leg was hugging my thigh. We just moved like that. She held herself up over me and stroked her body back and forth over mine. It felt like there was a slight breeze and water splashing on the surface of a small lake. Objects were floating and there was a wave rising. Splendid nakedness. I'd known nothing of this before, nothing of the bright, bright red of flowers on fire or the very long sticks of purple protruding out of the earth.

I was fixated on Una—her body raised up, the skin of her neck. And her fingers with their bitten-down nails that held my waist tightly and kept her hips on mine, moving back and forth. But my attention wavered when I heard a sound, something like the sigh of a bird enjoying the hard push of a strong wind. It was a quivering voice full of long breaths echoing softly like brushed steel. It was Una.



One thing we never talked about though, was what she felt about her impending marriage to Iwan.

Lipstick. The waves are green. Broad bands of brown light filter in layers over the sky. Jane is in the bathroom. Thomas and Megan are not there. She forces long strips onto her lips with a smear of lipstick.

The boy had appeared to her in the form of another man, an S.I.W. A self-inflicted wounds patient who she spoke to in the recovery ward. He had somehow managed to break and splinter his femur. He told her that he was having second thoughts about having done it. It was his court martial. He could not return home with that hanging over his head. People would find out. It would be humiliating. How had he decided to do it? She had wanted to leave also, to return to her quiet life filled with putting the laundry into the ringer, while wearing her full-flowing pastel silk housecoat. She had wanted out of that place, but she could not hurt herself. Not like that man. At what moment could he possibly have decided to shoot himself in the leg? How could he hold a

loaded gun flush to the khaki pants covering his leg and pull the trigger? The shame, he had told her, covering his face and taking the cigarette she had passed to him. He had puffed out the edge of his mouth, shuddering. The cigarette moved around like eyelashes trying to blink something out of an eye. He had been at Hill 355. Jane had been there also. Not the same intensity, not the same crack of howitzers and explosion of grenades emptying out around her and at any time feeling like she could be hit. But she had been there, waiting in the hospital with the rest of the nurses as dusk and the hard rains fell.

She paints red ovals, joined together, overlapping. She recalls the waiting, what it was like to stand in front of the small mirror hanging from the pole in the middle of her tent, wearing gum boots and a tunic. She takes out another lipstick. She snaps the metal cap off the Revlon Fire and Ice, turns it, and winds up the bright, creamed pink. An impossible colour to find out on the barren hills or on the dusted roads. The colour of a sunrise as it bounced back against an eyeball. This had been the same colour she held in her hand until she heard the very first grenade. The sound of a grenade was distinct, the large pop and the cracking echo it left in her head made it feel like water was running out of her ears. She knew better than to try plugging it up with a finger or some cotton. It did not work. It was not that kind of water. It was not real. But it flowed anyhow.

She draws the colour onto her lips. The insistent pink erasing her present and the dry shadow that is her mouth. In the shell of the washroom where she stands with one hand resting on the cool porcelain of the sink, she watches the transformation.

Thoughts ring through her about the fear she had of the North Koreans overtaking them with bayonets, the Chinese coming down upon them with screeches from their bugles. Soldiers were fighting for their lives just near her—it could just as easily have been her. Mortar blasting began. A sequence of large explosions emptying out, deeper than the grenades, echoing lower and agitating that place in her throat that would start to quiver. She could actually feel the mortar fire entering her, the muscles of her body echoing from explosions.

Standing in front of the mirror next to an old photograph of a dairy maid, Jane notices that this movement is invisible to the outside eye, a movement that only she can feel, the inside of her body having become her own private battlefield. Jane circles her lips with the pink lipstick. His body is returning to her. He is approaching. She puts another layer of pink on her lips. It is getting thicker. They are opaque. Lipstick can stop him, she finds herself confiding to the metal tube in her hand. The only problem is that it does not last. Is he coming closer? The war inside her responds with its own small explosions, tremors and aftershocks that begin in her chest and claw their way up into her throat. She circles her mouth again, but this time she holds the lipstick with both her hands, because she finds that her right hand has started shaking. She finds that she goes over the edge of her lips in some places. It creates a new shade, a lighter pink, and it makes her look younger—young that is, like a child. But there is no time for her to process this, because he is coming on stronger now and she is too busy trying to hold the lipstick still. She has it now, firmly. The force of holding it has made her fingertips go white. Now each explosion—there another echoing across her sky—is accompanied by the rush of lipstick

around her mouth. She is not stopping. Another shell bursting. Thunder in the cavity that used to be her body. Another round of pink. Another blast and with her hands moving fast now, she circles her mouth, wavering over the line of her lips. She sees nothing, only the pink circles in the mirror. He is coming closer. Lipstick can stop him. War can be won with one woman's lipstick. She is doing it. She is fighting him. She is battling the battle against him. She focuses on nothing more than drawing it, seeing it there. What fireworks, what works those sounds are making outside. Inside, Jane is making her own work. Herself the canvas upon which she transcribes the insanity of his approach. She continues around her face creating a pink hole on it, one that opens and knows the ugliness of tired jaws stretched open, even though she can hear the loudspeaker crackle to life. Some instructions are being called out and she can hear boots running. They are moving towards something, but she cannot stop. Besides, she has lost control of her hands. They move without her to the sound of explosions, jagged and reckless. They are what she hears. The pink goes up even over her nose, tracing one of her nostrils and then down to her chin, along one side of a cheek. The boots have subsided, explosions still echoing, and now something else—a beating. That is the only way she can describe it—the sound of a beating. The beating of the wind by something strong. A familiar sound. A motor.

She stops for the first time, holding the nub of the metal case. Pink spilling over its edges, rubbed along the sides. Yes, she recognises that sound, drawing her gaze for the first time off the mirror. The sound is a helicopter. She knows it, while she looks for the first time at the pink spilled and shadowed across her

face. The wounded are coming, lying on stretchers on the helicopter floor. He is among them. She knows this. Probably more head and burn injuries. Some, separated from their units, maybe brought in on handcarts or wagons, others may be the walking wounded. Much later in the dawn, after a night of operations, after they get the spinal injury patients onto the plaster beds, she will be able to rest for the coming day. But not rest completely—he will find her.

She takes a towel, pours alcohol on it and uncovers her face. She looks out the window. It is not a helicopter but Thomas in the tractor, unloading some machinery. It is Thomas, she is in Wales, and she is waiting here. It was a daymare. That is all.

When she goes down to greet him, Thomas says to her, laughing, “What’s that, miss your aim?”

“What are you talking about, Thomas?”

He shrugs.

It only comes back to her later when she looks in the mirror and sees a thick square of pink.

Megan

The sea at Gwyn. The hills have courage. Around them are the figures of importance: dark waves stretching and the throat of the sea. They know it will end, will be no more, will gradually sink into the water, a small handful at a time. But the hills love water. The land moves to the water, climbs into it and under it. It says: I will come to you. The land loves wet, shiny things in motion. It brings threads of earth to the water. Water will level the earth. It seeks this experience. It smiles at her on the land, still unknowing. The risen obstacle. It is motion in her path.

There is something about Wales that makes her want to live and live until she has more life in her than almost anyone. The secret is nothing, but she cannot believe it. She has been compelled to listen to something in herself that says otherwise and tells her to do other things. She wishes to say to herself, "Be blind and you will have your earth and your heritage." She knows that the wise

have the force of dreams—they are circumscribed with the temperaments and the contrasts that they experience and that compel them.

She feels it in her like the water, she feels it rising and opening up. The expansion. She is learning that we are, none of us, alone. There is always a following. It is as constant as the yeast of the waves tumbling ashore. But recognition is not part of her emergence into two. She does not believe in the change, because the change is not visible, the inward pressing outward. It lies within the cortex, curled into itself, minuscule and protected. She herself guards it without even a sliver of consciousness about what she does. Her confusion is pure, and can be traced through the line of blood that winds its way through her and that will wind its way out of her. What she does not know is that they each have their time. And in time, it will come to each of them. She cannot see, because the form that it has entered her is in the form of love. It has left its seed firmly planted to grow. She knows this. She feels it growing. Love's seed. So much so, that she will never remain the same again.

What Megan sees when she looks across the long bar of water is Una. Una has become a part of her, entered her, and left a piece of herself there. Their life is growing and expanding. It extends like the sea, merging into something that Megan had thought was impossible. Thinking—Megan has changed the way she does it, or rather does not do it. She has begun a new way of feeling through the events that transpire around her. She has swung herself open. She is no longer enclosed within a hardened shell, but has opened up. Now, she finds herself formed by the shores, strands, coasts, and beaches that she rushes up against.

She cannot remember what her grandmother told her only a short while ago. She is taken with expanding against banks and being washed over.

I saw Thomas following behind a large group of sheep on one of the days that I found myself walking home over the field from school, thinking about Una. He was up on the horizon. I started to walk towards the direction that he was heading so that we would meet. I faltered a step when the thought entered my mind that I hoped he wasn't planning on making rarebit again for supper. I was looking down at my shoes, thinking that maybe I could try making a casserole.

When I next looked up, I saw Thomas and Dewi running around the sheep, herding them in the opposite direction. I watched in bewilderment as Thomas, Dewi and the sheep headed in the opposite direction, away from Bury Green towards Rhossili. What was he doing? I switched bearings and walked towards the new direction that Thomas was heading in. Just then, he and Dewi rushed around the sheep again, and this time, took them towards the line that was directly in between the two directions he'd taken previously. That time I had

no choice but to run. I didn't think that there were many chances that he'd change direction again and herd them right towards me.

"Where are you going, Thomas?" I called out before I'd even reached him.

"What are you doing here?" was his answer.

"I'm on my way home," I told him, but I really wanted to say that I'd begun to have the need to walk, and to walk far and long.

"But this isn't the way you should be taking home." He scratched his unshaven beard. It whitened his face like frozen, glistening snowflakes.

"What do you mean? Of course it is! The road is just over there."

He shifted the scratching of his beard to his head. "Bullocks!" he shouted while hitting his stick on the ground. "Bloody hell!" he yelled at the sheep.

"What is it?" I asked, stepping back.

"I've been trying all bloody day to find the bloody path to bring these bloody animals to a bloody heath for bloody grazing! Where the bloody hell is the track?" he yelled at the sheep who looked back at him, unmoving, uninterested, unconcerned.

"Why don't you just let them graze near Bury Green?" I asked.

"I can't do that. That's not the way things were done when I was growing up. These aren't just sheep," he said gesturing towards the sheep. "These are traditional Welsh sheep, not the usual English Cotswolds, Oxford Downs, Leicesters or Shropshires. These are ancient—a cross between the best Radnor Forest and the native Welsh mountain breed. They're used to the rigours of the climate, they need harsh landscape and harsh weather especially if any lambs are

going to be dropped.” I looked at the forty or so animals standing in a flock in front of me. They looked white and fluffy to me, not fit for harsh weather, not fit for war against the elements.

“So where were you trying to bring them, Thomas?”

“Pugh Wynn-Ellis told me that there was a prehistoric packhorse track somewhere in the area that led to a Roman road. Follow that, he told me, and I’d find myself at some of the finest wastes in the area.”

“Maybe you should get him to draw you a map.”

“I’ll find it tomorrow.” He hacked, as he walked around the sheep to get them moving again.

At that moment, I wanted to tell Thomas that her name was Una, and I didn’t know how to describe the colour of her eyes. Images of Una had made me want time to stop, and for everything to freeze over in a lush, hushed dream. And not only for it to stop, but also for me to replay it. To summon scenes and events back to me after they had happened. To live in some kind of place where I could remain in my reverie. My fantasy was so extensive that I’d invented encounters with Una. Not that I needed to at all, the times that I saw her were so real. But it was because I feared that I wouldn’t see her again that I felt compelled to imagine. I was so pleasantly surprised, that it was a woman who had become the object of my desire, a smooth-skinned woman whose body bore a wonderful resemblance to my own. I’d never looked at a woman in that way, never considered one as an object of my contemplation. For the most part I had avoided them, thinking that their thoughts of throwing parties and sending invitations with large, bulbous handwriting, were not for me. I much preferred

men—handsome, tall, dark men—especially when they discussed the state of the planet and its history. But Una seemed different. It was the consummate softness of the skin that ran along the tempered stem of her throat. It was a delicate space, unshielded, and vulnerable. Before she would leave me, I would fix my eyes there, on her throat, and feel the heat move through me. In my daydreams of her, she would be sitting beside me. Only that. All in the world would be right just as long as she was by my side. I didn't notice where we were immediately—only after some time in the dream could I look around me. I would see that we were in a beautifully white room with high ceilings, ornate mouldings of leaves and vines twirled together, and large windows with wet trees hanging outside of them. This was the spot where I always imagined I was looking at the soft skin of her neck. This was what my head was always wanting, as if it was reading a scene to me. It was a setting that was squarely real with tables hugging books on their corners. I could watch Una for hours—especially her elbows, wrists, and fingers as she very gently reached over me and lifted the edges of the book pages I was reading, so that they fanned onto one another. It was this scene that I became so immersed in. I knew that it made me happy because my eyelashes blinked at times, as if there was a precise point of recognition in my daydream that I was signalling back to. And there was. I was dreaming of having a home with Una. I was dreaming of our life together. Our future together. At first I suppose that I must have been attracted to her because of the knowledge she had. It was a covetous kind of crush—I wanted to own her experience, not her body, only her mind, or at least a part of it. But then I had

changed, or things had changed and I'd wanted only her. I wondered if Thomas could read that in me. I looked back at him where he was ranging the sheep.

I saw that he was kicking at the earth with the toe of his boot, while the sheep rested, almost seeming to have formed a pen around him. The smell of the damp in their wool seemed suddenly strong. I saw that Thomas had something in his hand, bared and pointing. I tried to see what he was holding in his hand.

"Rubbish," was his answer once I reached him. He held a paper in the mitt of his hand. "I'm going to bury it."

"What does it say on the paper?" I asked him.

"Don't know," he replied. "I need my spectacles for that." He held the paper out in front of him and squinted at it. "All I know is that people shouldn't be throwing their rubbish on our land. Your grandmother wouldn't have stood for it," he answered.

"Mind if I take a look?" I asked.

He passed the paper to me.

I looked at it, trying to follow along with the lines of squiggled text. The moment was fierce. It felt like I was crowning something, achieving unity, becoming one with this bared handwriting. Through the time that I looked at it, I had become part of the person who had written it. I knew what it was like to go into someone and envision through his or her eyes. I reached behind my neck and felt how it had broken out in hot lines of sweat. I felt wondrously tender and vulnerable. Something about this writing must have resided in me also, small but still mouldable and sharp. It was intense to feel that kind of merged

communion. I could sense it slipping into me, occupying a large space that I hadn't even been aware of until that very moment.

"It's okay, Thomas," I told him.

He looked up, "What do you mean? I've already finished making the hole."

"We can use it some other time," I said.

I slipped the paper into my sleeve. As I did so, I thought I felt that my destiny was slipping. There was something that I shouldn't do. There was something that I shouldn't approach. But it felt joyful—Una and I in our imagined home together, and my mother's writing that I was holding in the sleeve of my sweater.

Iwan lived alone in a house that he rented just outside of town. That's how he and Una had met initially. She would walk past his house on her way to the Lettis Leefe. It was a large house with a garden in the front and one in the back also. There were trees, tulips, and marigolds that he tended, and several bushes, some with round, red berries, others with fluid green fronds. He had a large garden in the back where he grew tomatoes, leeks, and red onions. At least four feet of firewood was stacked in the shed next to the house. On a cool evening when there was the clean smell of burning wood in the air, it was almost certainly rising out of his chimney. Although it wasn't necessary, he drove to the school where he taught early every morning. When he returned in the evening, he often had a box of groceries with him. When he went into the house, he turned on a lamp and closed the curtains. It made it look like there was a small

eclipse in his front room, because the light shone around the edges of the curtain like a dead star.

“There was nothing wrong with him. I mean, not that I look for negative qualities in a person first off, but it just seemed like the right thing to do at the time,” Una said to me in the quiet where we were lying in the barn. “He just seemed different, you know Megan? I’d see him occasionally going for walks in the town when I was working late, he’d look at gardens, trees, and people. He’d smile at all of them. He looked so attractive when he smiled too, so striking. There just didn’t seem to be anything wrong with him. Now I know that I keep saying that, but that’s actually what went through my mind. He would sometimes go away at weekends or even one week at a time. And I thought, why not? He must enjoy spending his time alone, living alone, eating alone. I like to be left alone to do my own thing, as you figured out, My Tender Seashell. It would be the perfect marriage if we both had freedom to spend time apart on our own interests. You know, I just didn’t think about it that much. I just figured that I had to. But I don’t. I don’t ‘have to’ do anything. And I’m only figuring that out now, after being with you. Why should I have to get married when I’m perfectly content the way I am? He doesn’t make that much money teaching at the school anyhow.”

“So how did it happen?” I asked her, as I leaned over and lit her cigarette.

“What?” she said through the cigarette filter as she inhaled. “You mean getting engaged?”

“Yeah. How you got engaged, how you got together.”

“Do you mean physically?”

“Yeah. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. If it’s private or something,” I laughed.

“Well, we never really got together...”

“What?”

“I know Megan,” and she started laughing, blowing a big stream of smoke into the hay in front of her so strongly that it came floating back. I found the smell of the smoke very strong, much more than usual. “Isn’t it hilarious? I mean for god sakes, I haven’t even kissed the bugger.”

“What?” I said again because it was the only word I was able to get out.

“Can you believe it? No, I can tell you don’t by the look on your face. Well, Megan Evans, it’s true. I’ve never kissed Iwan Williams. I’ve never even laid a hand on his tight, little arse.”

We both started laughing. I wouldn’t have been surprised if Thomas could hear us from wherever he was on the fields, or my mother from wherever she was in the house.

“You’ve never kissed Iwan?”

“I’ve never kissed any boy—any man I mean.”

“You’ve never kissed Iwan?”

“Megan, get over it. Why is that so incredible to you? Truth be told, I don’t think Iwan’s really ever wanted to kiss me. He’s never even tried.”

“But you’re so beautiful.”

“And you’re so sweet. Anyhow, I suspect Iwan is saving it until after we get married. Besides, I’ve never seen the need to kiss a boy, that’s all. I imagine it’s quite rough on the lips,” she said, as she stroked her own cheek. “And you?”

I was losing myself in her clear rose-tinged skin.

“Megan? Hello? Ever kissed a boy—that’s the question here.”

“Oh, yeah sure.”

“Did you like it?”

“I don’t know. Yeah. It’s fine,” I found it difficult to concentrate on our conversation. It wasn’t because I was thinking about Iwan or even that I was thinking about when we’d.... I wasn’t thinking about what kind of person I was to have been intimate with my lover’s fiancé. I was thinking about how happy and elated I was feeling.

I had something that Iwan didn’t have. I had Una. That had been it all along. What had happened between him and I in his office had all been a mistake. It had been her who I had wanted. It had been her who had taken me there, and not him. Her who I’d thought about during the entire episode, not him. And perhaps that was the way it had been for him also, perhaps he imagined that I was she. Perhaps living alone in his house, sleeping in his room without Una, or walking along a muddy road without Una were all impossible for him and he had needed some sort of relief. I understood what he must have been feeling. Una had a kind of presence that seemed to come from up in the sky, down over the field and into the swelling sea.

More than Iwan’s relationship with Una, I was thinking about my own relationship with her. It was her and me who had consummated our love in that lonely landscape. It flashed suddenly, a feeling that a thing has transpired. This is the way I felt: whatever was inside me was mine and Una’s alone. I heard that phrase in my head. It was my own self speaking to me, but something that was

so unlike me, yet so firm in its concept of who I was. Perhaps it was the self that had been formed since I'd lived in Wales. Perhaps it had something to do with my grandmother's declaration: "stay close to the code"—was that what she'd said to me?

From that moment onwards, I continued to hear it. I can hear it now even as I tell you this. What I knew didn't matter, what I'd learned from talking among groups of girls outside the five-and-ten stores, at sock hops and soda bars didn't seem to make a difference. It's something I was so sure of, its truth astounded me: Una had gotten me pregnant.

The feeling of this realisation is something I know I will never forget my entire life. It was like the wind pushing a door or a window open, forcing a bell to ring. There was the feeling of not being alone. It was the feeling of being surrounded comfortably with no escape. I had a vision held tightly beneath the surface of my skin, hidden within the green cell of my passion. It was like learning how to breathe for the first time. Everything was being pushed by some unseen force along with an invisible, dizzying wonder that resided deep within me.

"Megan?" I saw Una's cobalt, azure, cerulean, unworldly, ocean blue eyes—they were like rounded bowls of blown glass, and either looked like they were flames that had just been cooled or like they were very icy.

Una and I were spending all of our free afternoons together in the barn. The day that I found out that she'd never kissed Iwan, I was late coming in for dinner. She had told me right before she left that she wouldn't be able to see me for a while. At the last minute, her mother had arranged for her to visit some of her older relatives who wouldn't be able to make it to the wedding. She was going to take the train to Saint David's, and stay there for a fortnight. Had I known that, I wouldn't have spent our time together talking about Iwan. Instead, I would have told Una what I had planned: I wasn't going to return to Canada when my father came back from the war to pick up my mother and me. This was firm in my mind. I decided that it was the best way of dealing with my situation. I wanted nothing else but to stay. We would remain in Wales in the house with Thomas for the first little while; I would give birth to our child—preferably outside, so the first thing he or she saw would be the ocean; Una and I would

build a house on the flat stretch of land further back from the cliffs; we would be happy. It was a simple plan, really. I just needed to have the right moment to tell Una about it. I wanted it to be special, I wanted it to be something that she'd never forget.

"There's something I need to tell you," I said, after we had both already started to walk in different directions from the barn.

"Tuesday," she answered, as she continued to walk away.

"Tuesday," I echoed, thinking that it was far too long until then.

When I finally went back to the house, I looked at the mail in the kitchen, and noticed that Thomas was busy preparing cockles. With his thick, stubby fingers, he was taking out each one from a string bag, and brushing it carefully with an old toothbrush.

"To make them shine," he told me over his shoulder. "They tend to get a bit dull after they've jumped around in the breadcrumbs and butter, so I'm trying to balance it out." His fingers looked like the tops of them had been cut off—they stopped abruptly, his fingernails were built like an afterthought, only half the size they should have been.

I peered at my mother who was sitting in the living room listening to the BBC, while staring at the grandfather clock. They were announcing the broadcast of *Under Milk Wood* in honour of Dylan Thomas, who had died earlier in the month in New York city. The commentator said that it was one of the greatest events for the human ear.

"Here you are," I said, and passed her a letter that had "Jane" written on the outside of it. It had arrived in the afternoon post, enclosed in an envelope

with a letter for me also.

She looked at it. The blue ink in slanted lines made her name look like it was trying to move off the paper. She took it from me, folded it over, and tucked it between her leg and the chair. She brought her hands up and clasped them in her lap.

“Thank you,” she said, and turned away to listen to the radio. *The Goon Show* had just started.

My letter had the same blue letters as hers—they also looked bent as if they’d started to be blown off the page. My father wrote about how he couldn’t wait until we went home. He wrote about going for walks in the fall when the leaves began to redden. He mentioned how he wanted to paint the house and that we could make my room the bright orange I’d wanted before we left. He wrote that he missed my mother and me, and wanted to spend some time with us in Wales. We could do a bit of sightseeing, visit some castles and ruins. He would be back in a couple months. It wasn’t long at all. In a way, I thought it would be good when he came back also—for my mother, not for me. I looked up at her and saw that she was still staring at the clock as she had been before I’d started reading the letter.

“Mum, are you going to read Dad’s letter?” I asked after a moment of looking at her and wondering what to say.

“Yes,” she answered firmly and got up from the chair. Then she stood in the middle of the room for an instant, before walking up the stairs to the second floor with the folded letter in her hand. I supposed that she had left to read my father’s letter, and then to write her own in response.

A few minutes later, Thomas asked me to get her for dinner. He said that the cockles looked like they were going to start to jump, and that it would only be another five minutes or so before dinner.

I gathered a wool shawl around me. It was cool in the house that day. The sun outside was dilated. I thought that I shouldn't go up the stairs. It wasn't a compelling feeling, something that struck me suddenly. I had more of an urge to call up than to go up. Perhaps it was because I'd suddenly put together a phrase that my grandmother had spoken to me: "stay enclosed within a hardened shell"—I was positive that's what she'd said. I also didn't want to startle my mother out of her quiet—I knew that she must have been reading my father's letter, because I couldn't hear her shuffling around. I only began to climb the stairs when I realised that I had to pee yet again—it seemed that I was now having to go every hour or so.

The window at the top of the stairs shot down a few shafts of light into my eyes. I was blinded for the instant in which I thought I saw my mother step from my grandmother's room to the washroom. Although I could have just called her, I continued walking up the stairs. Perhaps also, I wanted an ally against Thomas' cockles—I wasn't convinced that they would be as tasty as he'd promised.

I'd asked Thomas, "What quantities of ingredients do you use to make cockles?"

"It doesn't matter," he'd answered. "It isn't the amounts, but how you put them together. I just have to mix butter, breadcrumbs, onions, and parsley

with the cockles. The butter and breadcrumbs make a delicious oily crisp that goes well with the slime of the cockles.”

I suppose he had meant this description to be appetising. But I think it had less to do with the palate and more to do with understanding what it meant to be Welsh.

To be Welsh, was to learn how to face the sea and the things in it. To sit by it and to stare at it day after day. To always see it turning upon itself and brushing downwards in smooth volleys and long sighs. To be Welsh was to sit long hours colouring oneself, because that’s what I thought when I saw my mother with a tube of lipstick in her hand. She is Welsh, I thought. But only for a moment, Welsh for only a moment, before I couldn’t identify what she was. My eyes were barely above the stairs. I held onto the railing. Her back was turned away from me, facing the mirror. I thought she would have heard me, but she didn’t turn.

I looked into the bedroom, and saw that my father’s letter was on the floor, still folded in a tight, flat cube under my grandmother’s art deco desk with its whiplash curves. Had she read it and neatly folded it back; or had she not read it and thinking it looked better on the floor, rested it there with its mouth waiting to speak; or had she dropped it, completely forgotten about it and gone directly to the washroom with no thoughts in her head about it at all?

Then there was a stroke. Long and very quick. I almost didn’t see it. I’d been looking at the letter trying to see if it could tell me whether it had been read or not. But then that stroke. It had happened outside of the focus of my eyes. The lipstick held and brought down. Lipstick on the face. Was that it? I

leaned against the wall. My mother's arm moved in short dashes just in front of her face, as she balanced on her toes close to the mirror. What was she doing? It was dinnertime, I wanted to tell her. There were cockles jumping in the pot that couldn't wait. Why start putting makeup on then, right before dinner? And then, there it was. She did it again. I hadn't been mistaken. A stroke of lipstick. I saw her, with one hand, lift up the hair that fell on the side of her neck closest to me. With her eyes focused on the mirror and moving towards it slightly, she brought the lipstick, dark and brimming with shining pigment, down onto her skin. And there it stayed for a moment, the lipstick on the skin, the hand on her head, the eyes on the mirror, not moving. It almost looked like there wasn't any mark on her neck. If she didn't move the lipstick, it would be like nothing ever happened. But no, she brought it down in a slow, flattened out line, in dark red, laced brightly. Down her neck, she twisted the lipstick making a half turn, a half circle like the dark lines of the symbols that she made in her letters. She brought it down far, pressing firmly. A vein in her neck stuck out. She brought it down still, just until it reached her collar and then it was lifted. Her other hand let go of her hair. It fell down over her neck, a curtain over a stage, saying no more, it was over.

I sank below the floor and walked back down the stairs then. What else could I have possibly done or said at that moment? There were cockles jumping in a pot not so far from there. Would that have been enough to compel her to leave the bathroom and forget about the lipstick? How can cockles possibly compare to a painted body? I went back with the shawl wrapped around me, and the sun spurting from the window in a kaleidoscope of yellows.

I told a lie then. What other choice did I have? I couldn't tell Thomas that my mother was in the bathroom painting herself, could I? As I stood in the living room, I looked at the stone fireplace through which we'd dragged my grandmother. Painting stone wasn't actually that different from painting a body. Both weren't actually meant to be painted, but they could be. If painting a stone fireplace wasn't a crime, then neither was painting a body. But I told a lie anyway. It was the look on Thomas' face that compelled me to do it.

"Too busy to eat cockles!" he said, as he grasped the old cast iron pot with his oven mitts and shook it firmly. The cockles made the sound of worried fingers flicking the inside of the pot. He pursed his lips together—the stubble on his face bristled outwards. I knew that nothing was more important to him than cockles at that moment.

"Ladies' problems," I heard myself saying.

With that, Thomas' face distorted and he took a long sip of ale, wiping his mouth with the oven mitt. His expression remained, while he asked me to get some plates and set the table. He didn't mention my mother again.

There truly is nothing like ladies' problems to instil horror in men. The horror is so fundamental, so hidden, that it almost never emerges in any conversation—only in the odd look on a man's face. When men think of blood and pain, they think about two things. One is their own imminent death. Imminent, because as soon as we are born and begin living, we also begin dying. It's a long process and sometimes a short one. But if short, it may involve blood and pain. A woman bleeding, a woman in pain, reminds men of their deaths. The other thing that it reminds men of is their inability to ever know what it is like

to have another human being growing inside of them, their inability to give birth. Things would be much better, if, after copulation, a pregnancy could happen in either the man or the woman, or perhaps even in both. I know, scandalous isn't it? But I've learned to say whatever I like. That's because I know that there aren't any repercussions. Anyhow, I was saying that if life worked more like that, there wouldn't be the jealousy and inadequacy men feel when they insist that the child is theirs and therefore must have their name. It is because they cannot get pregnant that they insist on this. And so, you shouldn't find it at all surprising that for one very brief moment, I imagined Thomas, shaking his cockles around by the stove, very pregnant and glorious, the round curve of his abdomen like a bulbous squash.

Ladies' problems. Perhaps it really was what my mother had, but just an extreme case. Aren't ladies supposed to paint themselves? To transform themselves into something different? Something better? Unpainted, a woman's face isn't really enough. My mother, in the most unique mood, may have thought that she had to paint herself. Bring out the angles in her face, see what kind of a lady she really was if layers of lipstick were applied to her skin. Then my mother's ladies' problems wouldn't have been so much not being a lady, but being too much of a lady. Lady overkill. So I hadn't lied to Thomas after all. My mother had ladies' problems, she really did.

That evening, I ate the cockles that Thomas had spooned into a bowl almost feeling happy, because I knew that he could be pregnant and that my mother was a painted lady. The cockles appealed to something deep within me—the crunch and the squeeze—two things that the human mouth needs to feel.

Afterwards, I listened to *Life with the Lyons* on the radio with Thomas, and then went to bed early. I listened for sounds from my mother, but could hear nothing from the upper floor. I thought that she might still have been in the bathroom with a cockleless stomach. I made a catechism for her. It instructed her to put the lipstick down. In response, I imagined that she did what I said. I told her to step out of the washroom. I said to walk past the window above the stairs, past the wind-blown fields where the moon was being held up by a transparent, grey cape. I thought I saw her there doing what I said. And then I instructed her to go to her bedroom and sleep. But she didn't or I imagined she didn't. She stood in front of the window watching the blackened moon. Her face was scarred with swirls, dried and crumbling like lava, the colour caught up in a malleable mass. Her face was no longer her own. It was the moulded form of some thing that had taken its hands and rubbed and blended every feature. Hers was thumbled flesh. Skin like moss that grappled around rocks, clinging like dog lichen clings to poor soil.

I looked out my window at the moon, that orb of silver. Its breadth extended out and along the field. Rays, large, outstretched, and translucent, sifting one atop the other by the big breath of black over the waves. Endless devouring. The moon dragging the water along its white lie. Holding back the crust of the clouds. A final blast of light and it was over. A final flash. There was no return. Being covered, there was no return, being hunted there was no return, being forgotten there was no return, being awakened there was no return.

Jane hears the calls of birds cawing. Their sounds drill and scream in a whirling harshness, entering her eardrum like a cold steel tongue.

The soldiers were returned in forms that were different from when they left. Shapes on stretchers, curling into themselves, arms held beneath them, huddled. The mud was so thick that it resembled caked fur or frozen pelts of chinchilla or nutria. They no longer had self-recognition, and if a mirror had been held up to their faces, their eyeballs would have remained dull. The muddied fields buried them before they were ready, encasing them in brown sarcophagi without mummification. They asked for their mothers in piercing tones.



“You killed him.” The surgeon looked at her, the clean tip of the still-cold scalpel held between his fingers.

There was for once, silence in the room.

“What blood type did you give him?” one of the other nurses asked her.

Jane felt something swimming inside of her. She wanted to escape.

Reverse time. Everything inside her was expanding. Her eyes felt huge. A panic at the nape of her neck. The operation had barely begun. The hurricane lamp hissed. The boy was still on the table, a victim of an anti-personnel bomb. The transfusion that killed him still dripped into his arm. Jane was standing beside it. Looking at his face. She asked him if he would forgive her, hoping his mind could still register her plea.

“A-positive,” Jane answered, biting her lip, tears running into her mouth.



The sheets are twisted around her legs. Her body feels slick, because she has just finished imagining that the boy was on top of her, that he was moving in her, that he was driving deeply into her. The violin music has started again. It is winding its way through the air in high notes. And then a pause. And emptiness. And nothing. Then it starts again in a low treble. There is no violin player around anywhere. There cannot be, because the music arises mostly in the quiet rooms of the house when Thomas and Megan are not there or asleep. It is like a screeching bird in the way that it repeats the same tune, and in the way that it buzzes overhead, the sound of its wings like a helicopter.



Sleeplessness. Memory loss. The kind of love she feels for her husband is the feeling one has for a very comfortable pair of shoes. A shoe that no one notices anymore because it is worn so often. In Korea, she wore combat boots. Combat boots were compulsory, and although she tried to make her feet remember what it felt like to wear comfortable shoes, all she felt were the combat boots.

When Jane looked at Graeme, all she saw was her husband. She could not remember what it felt like when he entered the space that was hers—the area that she could reach with her arms extended. That was her space, her place. When anyone walked into it, there was always a sudden jarring, an alert, a danger, an uneasiness, a discomfort, a happiness, an elation. But it became that he could enter and leave that place without her feeling all that much. Seeing him, feeling him as he approached, left her with no intensity while he was there, and no memory of his imprint on her.

She remembers Graeme in the surgery.

“Do you know what I’m saying? I don’t care what you to do with everything else. I want to keep my dick,” the soldier groaned as he was slid off the stretcher onto the table.

“Just lie down. We’re going to put you to sleep. Try to think about something. Think about fishing, watching those lines flying out across the water.” Graeme had winced as the nurse shot thiopental into the disk of skin

that had been cleaned on the soldier's arm. Jane had been assisting at another station, wishing that Graeme would tell the soldier the truth.

"Just tell me if I'm dead, just tell me. I'm eighteen you know. I'm just beginning. I took a piss all over myself. I could feel it just leaking out of me," the soldier's arms had to be held back because he was trying to grasp at the middle of his body. His fingers were twisted.

"When I was a kid, I spent my summers salmon fishing on the Skeena in B.C. You should try to make a trip out there when you get back," Graeme said as he waited for the barbiturate to turn off the soldier's awareness. At that moment, Jane had wanted to yell at Graeme for him to tell the soldier what was really going to happen.

"I need my dick. I need it," the soldier panicked. "It's all going sour," he choked with weighted eyes.

"The best part is grilling your catch over the fire in the evening. Unless it starts to rain that is. I hate the rain," Graeme said. Everyone could see that the soldier's wound was from a bayonet—the North Koreans were all equipped with them.

"Tell me what you're going to do to me," the soldier moaned. Tell him, Jane wanted to call to Graeme. And then against the thrumming of the medical equipment, the soldier added, "I'm from B.C. I love the rain."

Jane watched as Graeme tilted his head to examine the man from B.C.'s penis. It was almost perfectly split from the head for an inch and a half and looked like two slick red pieces of salmon laid side by side. Graeme took both sides of the penis and held them together, making it appear whole again.



It is late into the night. She is in the mood to place her fingertips on piano keys. Jane would like to play the piano, and make poetry in the air. But everything on the edges is pushing outwards. It is not wanting to be grey, not wanting the ice that is in the fingers to penetrate in cold layers. Although the sky is moon-bright, it feels like steel slabs are hovering over the landscape. A dense surface that presses down and pushes Jane, compelling her to move in small dribbles towards some unknown destiny. Destiny is cruel when there is none.

And what of the grey that cannot really be seen, but that is felt wholly like a spectre walking through a living body when the day comes to an end and the night is about to begin? That is the true nature of this cold. Like a frozen body that slips into one's own and takes over everything. It is wise to be aware that no one actually walks alone. There is always a following invisible to the eye. These phantoms colour and morph occasions that could have been illuminating and real. Their task is darkness and dry reality.

Jane gets out of bed, goes to the washroom, and rinses her face, putting a sheen of water over her skin. She slips her fingers along the soap and presses it onto her cheeks. She does this several times until there is soap under her eyes, along her chin, around her mouth, and across her forehead. She wipes it down her face and her neck. It has the consistency of watery mud. She can feel how it has glazed her skin, and has begun to stiffen just barely. She takes more soap and reaches down and lathers it on her chest, her nipples, and her breasts. Jane's

skin feels like it is made of stiffened water. She is trying to clean herself. She supposes that it is all her imagination again, but she cannot help believing that she is coated in a blanket of mud. What she sees is a mudded field and her face near it. So close to it that she could have put out her tongue, licked some of the mud, and swallowed it. This was just before she was be sent home, when they were assigned to go out and get some soldiers who had been injured in close combat. The area had been cleared and secured.

The group went out in khakis and helmets toward the direction that the team leader had thought the wounded were lying.

And then, “Down, down!” Jane was shoved into a gully, her hands in front of her trying to ease the fall, but they slipped and she found that her chin was sunken into the mud.

The ack-ack was going on above her while she was finishing the sentence she had started with the soldier who had been walking beside her: “...short, but doesn’t Winnipeg have hot summers?” Jane found that she was screaming this question to the Korean mud that she had suddenly found was swimming around her chin.

The soldier—where was he? He had just told her that he made a living from being a tailor back home. Where was he? She could not turn. There was grass around her—the ack-ack rushed through it. Drops of dark purple patterned the mud where she was lying. They sank down and then buoyed upwards. Jane, not rising on her elbows, not wanting to know more than what she was seeing, watched the surface of the purple drops. They glistened with a slight silver shiver, a minuscule metallic gleam. Jane, eyes narrowing from the pressure of the

gunfire above, thought that she was seeing the sun reflected in the purple droplets. She thought that there were many suns. Dozens of suns reflected at the drop in front of her. Light coming out of the mud. Shining and then not shining. Flashing at her. That is what was happening. She was not moving. It was them. It was just happening. They were signals, codes speaking to her. Flash. Dash. Dot. Pause. She was reluctant to blink in case she should miss one of the letters that were blinking at her.

“Whine for the key,” she read.

The purple droplets seemed to be repeating this message over and over again. The dots and dashes flowing in steady succession. She started to do what it told her.

“The key, the key,” she said hoarsely to the mud. The droplets continued to fall. Jane called out, “The key, the key!” spreading her message to the mud and the roots of grass beside it. She could not hear what she was saying. The gunfire was so loud. There was pressure on her head from all the blasts. She could not hear her own voice shouting about the key. She could only feel it.

“Eeeeeeeeeee,” Jane’s entire body was saying it. When the soldier from Winnipeg with the bleeding arm came down next to her, he shoved her over into the grass. The message disappeared, flattened by his fist. She forgot all about her message when she saw how his arm was bleeding from a small bullet graze in his upper shoulder. She reached for it, taking it into both her hands and worked at stopping the blood. She put pads onto his arm, while winding tape around it.

“Don’t you have more supplies with you?” he yelled at Jane.

“No,” she mouthed back at him, her empty haversack lying in the mud

beside her.

“None?” he questioned her again.

“We don’t carry combat supplies with us when we’re doing an E.M.S. pick-up. You’ll be okay—it’s only a surface wound,” she screamed into his ear as she pressed on the bandage, and covered the smudge of red that was spreading on it.

Without thinking, she reached out and brushed the tears that were covering his face. Startled, he moved his head away from her. Then he reached up and felt the wetness of his face. His hand shook as he brought it close towards him to look at the blood on it. But there was none. Just the tears from the pressure of the gun near his head.

Just then, the grass behind them let in heads, hands, feet, arms, and shoulders. Bodies came through. They seemed to pour like there was a flood bursting, and then they became whole in their green camouflage. It was three members of her unit, pushing back, their hands empty. Jane did not look at their faces, only at their uniforms, which were the same as hers.

Somehow, she turned herself around. They started digging through the mud into the wall of grass. They floundered there for a short while before Jane turned to the soldier who had been beside her. He was curled there in the grass on one side of a ditch. She turned around with the members of her unit.

“Where was he hit?” one of them asked her.

“I thought there was only a light wound in his arm,” she shouted back.

He was tightened into a ball. They looked for a more serious wound. There was none. There was no pulse either. His arms and knees were tucked inwards. He had died without protest, without a wound. He had given up. His gun was

beside him, his face calmed and indifferent to the ack-ack overhead. Jane wanted to stay with him.

“Evans! Evans! For God’s sake come on!” a man’s voice cried.

She was pulled along the mud, back out of the fighting. Then the thought entered her head that she had gone into this war to try to save her marriage that possibly was not as good as she had once thought.



The violin had started there, in Korea. The music had driven across the open fields down to her from the hills. It struck over the paddies of rice, and hastened through the nodding panicles of spikelets, even touching on the leaf smut and the blast. It passed further down into the rain-fed flooded fields, meeting with the mud-water in the pasty murk, and it reached down into the very place where the base of the rice stalks met the wetted earth. As time passed, it stopped floating and hovering through the air. Instead, it remained at a human level, a level close to the ear and close to the body.

Jane thinks that it must come from him while he’s walking. He follows no rules of privacy or decency, but brings his music with him. He plays piercing trills, holding the same note for inhuman periods in monstrous repetition. It is a betrayal, this violin music. It knows its charms, but does not speak of its cohort until it is too late and he is already present and unrelenting.

Jane looks at her soap-covered face in the mirror. She thinks that she looks like him—the boy she killed on the operating table. She must send him another letter.

Pugh Wynn-Ellis is helping to clean out some space in the barn for the additional sheep that Thomas is going to buy. He has brought his truck and he, Thomas, and Megan are filling it with whatever clutter they can carry. It seems like there are one hundred years of discarded objects, and unwanted belongings in every corner—rusty iron clamps, newspapers that have somehow been petrified into rock-like sheets, and a black flapper’s hat that is veiled with two overlapping spider’s webs. Thomas and Pugh Wynn-Ellis have carried out the front seat of a carriage with the straw stuffing coming out of the cracked leather, an old icebox with one hinge missing from the door, and a trunk with the name “McCrimmon” crossed out on it. Megan wonders if she should go back to the house. She wants to urinate even though she just went half an hour ago after coming back from school. More than that, she wants to write a letter to Una, and ask Pugh Wynn-Ellis to deliver it. No, she knows that that is all wrong.

Megan is thinking about her grandmother, how her body had been lying in front of the fireplace beside where Megan had sat. A dead body had been beside her live body, and then it had been dragged up the chimney of the house. Those kinds of things were not written anywhere into the places where they happened. What else had happened in that house? Pies had burnt in the oven, a baby had been born in the muck room, someone had stood by the living-room window looking at the rain and crying for his loneliness, a child had spied the *Helvetia* approaching the shore too closely and no one had believed her because ships never strayed that far east. Any of those things could have happened or none of them. It is not written anywhere. The past is invisible. There is only the present, nothing else.

A person is like a field. It is impossible to see the life that happens on a field, to see battles and strangulations, to see the sleep, desire, and love that happens on its slope. There is just the field, perhaps with a few small holes in it or marks where the cannon wheels passed, but really, its life is invisible. A person may also have stories, but where can they be found? There is no story inscribed into a body, no transparent writing that emerges out of a forearm or an abdomen. Stories are invisible, they disappear after they happen.

What of other people's stories? Megan wishes that they were inscribed somehow. She wants to look back through them, but she cannot seem to read them from the book in her mind. It is her grandmother's stories that concern her. What did her grandmother say? What did she tell her? Megan cannot seem to remember. "There is something...there is something..." But Megan cannot

remember what it is. "It is possible to beware in our line..." Words like that—her grandmother spoke in a language that was incomprehensible.

Megan looks on as Thomas and Pugh Wynn-Ellis carry out three large carriage wheels that have been painted red, and wonders what stories her mother has brought back with her. She wishes that her mother had returned holding ten sheets of paper and presented them to her. She needs a catalogue of the most significant things that happened while she was in Korea. Megan needs a story to read.

How else is she supposed to learn about the one-legged people whose bodies shook against the earth?

She has just received a letter from her father inquiring about her mother's condition. He wrote that he has not gotten any correspondence from her since she left. He will tell Megan all about it when he sees her, he writes. In the meantime, can she send a letter to him? Can she write him, and let him know that Jane is doing okay? P.S., he added, your mother was bothered about all the people, both UN soldiers and Koreans, who stepped on land mines. "Bothered," he wrote Megan on the bottom of the second page of his letter before he signed off.

She does not know what he meant by that word. Megan is bothered that she will not be seeing Una for two more Tuesdays. She spent part of the previous night awake, looking for her where the bright moon shone through the window. For Megan, bothered means a day or so of irritation. Does her father mean the same thing? Were mine victims extra work for her mother? Was the operation long and tedious?

He was so precise when writing about physical details, yet when it came to discussing emotions, Megan never quite knew what her father meant. What she really wants is a story about her mother's experience with land mines. Or at least she wants to be able to see it there, above her mother's eyebrow—the first day she saw a land mine explode; or there, just in the way she held her mouth—the first day she saw a person injured from one. Megan wants her mother's story shown to her so she can see her life lived in the war. She wants to hold her face close to the texture of her mother's experience and see how it bubbles and froths.

Her mother probably held her secrets close to her, clutching them through the long days of surgery. Everyone around her probably thought she loved being a nurse, because she was so good at it and she loves people. Megan knows that there is something else there. She can read that in her mother, that the caring is gone in her. It is inscribed into her. It is not in the way that she looks at things. Perhaps in the way she holds onto objects, like a cup, turning it in her hands. Yes, that is it! Megan can see that her mother has changed in the way that she holds onto the pen when she is writing letters to her father. She touches it, and touches it to her like she is creating some kind of ritual.

Of course, she has not been writing letters to Megan's father. Megan knows this. She saw it on the piece of paper she found on the field that day with Thomas. Instead of seeing her mother's handwriting, Megan saw other things. Strange figures in minute ovals. The shapes were roughly drawn. They were hazed. There were other figures that seemed to appear one on top of the other. Tight lines whirling.

That is the reason Megan thinks that her father was incorrect when he wrote that Jane was bothered by land mines. The little drawings she has done have not been of explosions or distended sun-like shapes—what Megan thinks pictures of mines would look like. No, there are no bright lights bursting out of the earth, nor an intense heat in the dirt, there are just the figures scratched onto the page.

“There is a code do as you would...” Gwyn had possibly said to Megan on the beach one time. Megan cannot remember. The only thing she can remember is that she must not behave toward her mother as she did to her grandmother. She must not turn her back on her mother. She must go into her world. “Approach, stay enclosed within us...” Is that what her grandmother had said? She cannot remember. It does not matter anyhow. She has more important things to do, like making dinner before Thomas tries to.



Once they are back in the house, Thomas says to Megan, “I have a joint in the oven.”

“A what?” she asks him.

“You know, a roast beef,” he answers.

“A real roast beef?” she presses, because they had something a few days before that he had called sausages, but that contained only breadcrumbs and cheese.

“Sure it’s a real roast beef.” He clears his throat. “Why would I say so if it

wasn't?"

While Thomas is busy in the kitchen getting supper ready, Megan sets the table. Her mother sits at a chair by the fireplace—her usual spot. Megan thinks that people who are in love always want to go somewhere. She is in love with Una so she wants to go to the barn (but she cannot until next Tuesday—thirteen more days from now, thirteen more days is all.) Her grandmother was in love with the sea, so she went to it. Her mother...her mother must be in love with something, because she always looks out the window.

"Megan," Jane calls to her. "Would you mind coming here?"

"What is it?" Megan asks, feeling herself getting nervous, thinking of her mother painting her face with lipstick. She has also wanted to talk to her mother about the letters and the symbols that mark their pages. About the fact that her father has not received one letter from her, yet she has supposedly been writing to him continually since her arrival in Wales. But perhaps that is my own mistake, Megan thinks. Her mother never actually claimed to be writing her father. It is possible that they had a disagreement before her mother left. Perhaps that is the reason her mother has not been writing him. Maybe the doodling she has begun to do is much more interesting than writing letters to him, maybe it is a stalling tactic, a way of avoiding that task.

"I can't eat this," Jane whispers to Megan, motioning at the Welshcakes on a plate beside her tea.

Megan almost gasps in relief that it is not something about the letters or the war, and then shakes her head, "Come on, Mum. You have to. Thomas made those especially for you. You even said that you like them."

“I liked them when my mother made them,” Jane says to Megan, tapping one with the tip of her finger. “They’re supposed to be a mottled golden brown colour. These are just a charcoal.”

“Mum, please don’t ask me...” Megan does not feel like she can eat anything. She already feels bloated even though her stomach is empty.

“All right, Megan. Just eat one, I’ll eat the other and it’ll be all over before Thomas knows any better.”

Megan looks over at Thomas who is leaning over the stove humming happily to himself. “Okay, Mum. But just this once. You’re on your own with the roast beef tonight.”

They both take one and bite into the dry, spiced Welshcakes at once. Then Jane, still with her mouth full, motions out the window and says, “Megan, what colour are those birds that are walking on the field?”

Megan does not look immediately because a few currants—that seem to be somewhat petrified—have become lodged behind her front teeth. She can feel them there, and no amount of twisting at them with her tongue can detach even one of them. Her solution is to remove the hard outer crusts of the Welshcakes, and then to chew them strategically along the back of her front teeth. Her hope is that the friction will dislodge the currants. She only looks for the birds her mother pointed out once this process has begun.

“See? That one there Megan, opening up its wings,” Jane says as she focuses out the window onto the field just beginning to be misted with the evening’s rain.

Megan looks toward them, but all she can see is the green field and

droplets of rain that have just begun to fall. “Where are they?” she asks Jane, squinting her eyes in an attempt to take them in. The field undulates in smooth waves as it usually does, and the grass is being pushed back from the force of the wind and the rain which has just become stronger.

“Just there in front of you,” Jane says. She holds a piece of a Welshcake poised in the air under her eyes as if she is trying to demonstrate its height from where they are sitting. The Welshcake must have been cooked on a very greasy griddle, because Megan can see small transparent bubbles on its surface.

But Megan cannot see anything on the field. The currants that are stuck behind her teeth feel suddenly like they are clogging her throat. She really has to see the birds. She really wants to see them. She tries to imagine them, walking around, pecking at the grass, their wings sometimes outspread to take in the rain and at others, folded to seal the droplets out.

Megan watches her mother as she lowers her Welshcake, and puts it back on the plate. Jane picks up the pencil that is on top of *The South Wales Evening Post*, and positions the point on the newspaper. With her eyes still on the horizon, she begins moving the pencil in different directions. Arcs emerge. Circles in a chaos of bending and returning, spreading and closing, soaring and landing. All the time, Jane keeps her eyes focussed on the spot where she sees the birds. Her hand is moving as if it belongs to someone else. It seems frantic—not like that of a person sitting in an armchair just about to have a second cup of tea.

“Do you see them?” she asks Megan again.

“Yes,” Megan answers, because she can see them right there on the paper

in her mother's hands.

"I should tell you about how he is then," Megan thinks she hears Jane say one moment later just as Thomas is bringing the roast to the table.

"Dinner's on in five minutes," Thomas says to them while holding the nub of a cigarette in his mouth. "I just have to finish preparing the mashed turnips and liver." He turns back to the kitchen.

"Oh dear," Megan says. And then, "You wanted to tell me something? Something about Dad?" she questions, while finishing her last bite of Welshcake.

"He never leaves me. He's always by my side," Jane says as she lifts up her teacup with the palms of her hands, while looking at the cooled chestnut sheen of the tea.

Megan is glad that her mother is not looking at her because she has just blushed. She has never considered anything about her parent's relationship, or the emotions that they have for one another, especially now that he is still in Korea. Megan hesitates, "Are you worried about him?"

"Yes, constantly now. I wasn't at first," she says, peering at her reflection that wavers in the teacup. "I just used to worry when he was gone. I was afraid—not knowing when he'd come back, not knowing when to expect him. I need to know."

"Well, I got a letter from him the other day...I think he's just fine."

"Yes, of course he's all right. He's here. He's here," and her mother makes a sudden and firm gesture with her knuckles toward something. It could

be the seat beside her, the entire living room, or the field outside the window that runs to the cliffs and then down to the sea.

Although Megan does not feel altogether comfortable with this realisation, she knows that her mother is talking about love for her father. She recognises those words herself, because she feels them and knows them deeply whenever she thinks about Una. "I know, Mum. I know," Megan says leaning down to put her arms around Jane, and feeling that they share something of a similar mind. Her mother does the same, taking Megan into a stronger hug than she usually does, pulling her in and holding her there.

It reaches the point where Megan has to say, "Everything will be okay. He's going to come back soon."

"When?" Jane asks, still holding onto her firmly.

"We'll know beforehand. There'll be a letter or a telegram, I guess. You should know better than me," Megan adds, feeling the need to break away from the hold Jane has of her.

"Yes, you're right. There'll be a message," Jane lets go of her. "I want to have it before he returns so that I can prepare."

Megan nods, and Jane seems to be happy with that because she smiles back.



Megan recognises that her mother is disappearing. Jane is going into the silver-grey-red-gold that held Gwyn captive, and that is keeping Megan awake. Jane is

descending beneath the sheen, beneath the breath, beneath the zephyr. Jane crosses daily into patterns of silver-grey-red-gold. She is encased there. Above her, rises the flat vessel of the sky, the blue, the white, the black, the skin of the earth. She goes down into it. She goes leaving Thomas and Megan and her life and the things she knows.

It is possible to see someone vanish while watching them almost in full view. Megan knows this now. She feels that in herself when she goes a long time without looking in a mirror. The reflection becomes something very much unlike the reflected her that she expects. And she vanishes. And then, when she next looks, it is through the periphery. It is also how she has come to know her mother. When Megan looks at her mother, faces her, and sees all that she can, she finds that she does not appear as expected. Jane has changed, and so Megan must stop looking at her from the front and see her from the side. It is these things that have the power to divide and transcend the rest of one's life. The movements and shapes of life are learned. Change never happens subliminally.

Megan thinks that she saw her grandmother go into the sea without witnessing it. This is what she meant to explain at the beginning, but it is difficult. It is blind sight that she has and continues to have. It was the first time. She knew almost nothing of what she saw. Blue ocean streaked across and across and across and up and up. Ocean carved, brushed, and plied in hard edges. Stretches of blue like a long wave in the sea that had not yet broken. A splendid wave rolling in toward a shore in one rush, taking any bits of water that it came upon into itself. A bar of water as if a hand was passing beneath it, before it, just under the surface. A hand circling the ocean and rushing through

it trying to reach its endless end. There was a pull that was left by its path—small water swirls and fast gullies. The blue. Along the edges of the band of blue was found the colours of silver-grey-red-gold. Sometimes mixed and other times alone, but always on the edge of the blue in very small filaments the silver, the grey, the red, the gold slipped alongside the blue. And her grandmother's hand, there, beneath the surface of the water.

Megan does not believe that it is true. Megan's gaze usually found itself moving upwards, off the sea's horizon into the sky to gaze at the furious tufts of clouds that passed overhead in their varying degrees of grey. Some of the darker clouds held themselves together like they were made of nets, sifting the rain that was behind them. Others white, illuminated by the sun, the sun hidden, as if it was too bright, too beautiful, that it needed a cloak of its very own. Or at night as she had done when she had first arrived—gone out with Una to watch the belly of the sky and the sharp lights that pierced and sank into it. Her eyes would stretch further, past the lights, into the black, the even black of the night sky. She had not had that many experiences looking down, especially not at the ocean. Her interests were more involved with real bodies and not the body of the water. But she begins to change slowly without noticing it after she listens to her mother talk of the birds. She saw it just slightly that day. The first real day that Megan does not feel the cold shoulder of the wind pushing up against her (because Tuesday is only twelve days from now, only twelve days until she can tell Una.) The sky had cleared itself of clouds and lay bared and open. She was walking toward the barn when she saw something floating on the waves. She thought it was a thin strip of metal from a ship. Perhaps it had sunk, the metal

had been submerged for years allowing the salt to grow holes in it. And then it had risen, lightened into a thin sheet, hovering through the water like the skeleton of a fish. And it lay there on the waves, a testament to the weakness of humans in the face of nature. But no, she was wrong. No ship, no fish. It was not really there and had disappeared with a new wave. One moment later, it was replaced with another thing. A rust, a gold, or a red. She could not tell which it actually was, but it emerged and passed in and out of the water. The silver-grey-red-gold emerged, descended, and emerged again. These were the colours of the sea her grandmother went into. It was no surprise. Her grandmother could see things that were not available to the normal eye. Now her mother is showing her things that she had never seen before, that she did not know were present. And she will also go down there into the unkempt spaces between looking and seeing.

This story is a document about the emergence of a child. I know I probably should have allowed you to watch the action unfolding from the end and move back from there, but I didn't know how to tell you these things. I suppose I could have written letters like my mother had done, filling them with circles, crosses, and X's whenever I found that I was unable to express myself. Or perhaps I could have built statues like my grandmother. But I prefer words—they are the stuff that seems to flow from me before anything else.

But back to the child. With the thought of Una by my side, I leaned into my pregnancy like it was something that I'd always wanted. I gave into the cravings for ice that I'd begun to have. There was nothing terrifying about it, especially since I was going to see Una in eleven more days, and I would be telling her everything. Certainly, I didn't think about things like the possibility of my death, the child's, or both, due to complications. When I thought of

pregnancy before I met Una, an old black and white engraving that I had once seen in a book came to mind. It was a frightening dense and detailed image with a feathery quality to it. The engraving told the story of a woman who had died while in labour. She'd been struggling in intense pain with uterine contractions for several days. The baby must somehow have been in the wrong position. So she died, too exhausted to push any longer. The woman was buried in the tomb inside a stone sarcophagus. For some reason or another, the lid was lifted off the stone chest several decades later. And there, inside of it, was the skeleton of the woman, no longer with her arms folded neatly across her chest, but touching the sides of the stone coffin, her legs splayed. And between her legs, was a small skeleton—that of a baby. It seemed like a terrible form of torture: to be born into a non-life; and to wake up and not see anything but to feel the wet beauty of the thing inside you demanding its life. It was the ultimate picture of birth and death and so someone engraved it.

But knowing that it had been Una who had gotten me pregnant, knowing that it was a woman who had gone into me and planted her love in my belly made me dream differently about pregnancy. I wanted our child to be born under the great landscape that I'd witnessed on those bright, stormy nights. I wanted to be outside when I delivered the baby, so that he could see the dream that had cast its spell upon me. I wanted him to be able to touch the ancient stones of the beach, feel the curves of smooth driftwood, and to see the wide, rolling waves.

I wanted his new home to be a wooden cabin with Una and myself. There would be warm light. The floor would be made of driftwood with knots in it, a

craggy grain but soft. Una would walk around the room in her bare feet with the baby in her arms, touching her toes into each corner. Behind his head would be a soft blanket made for him by his mother. He would see us, he would hear us. His small heart would pound with the life that we had given him. Lying on his side, he would suck on his fists. When he cried, it would come out in small animal sounds, heaving them from the back his throat. And Una and I would call back to him in those sounds. And he would stop his yowling, and his heart would be warmed. And we would be there to watch him as he woke up. And he would wake up. He would wake. Our lovely child.

We would work together, being industrious and successful, even though our living conditions were crude. On warm days, we'd go into the ocean and swim circles with ease, and like fast victims of grace, we would marvel as we turned. We would rise upon the swell. When the wind would blow, we'd whirl onto our backs, finding a new direction through which to ferry ourselves. It would be a senseless journey, but it wouldn't matter because we would have a home.

We would have a real home by the sea with cut wood lying before the fireplace. We would also have sheep, dresses, and down blankets to lay our children in. These would be the things with which Una and I, together, would be impassioned. We would dream without rest of a domestic life where we could fall in love everyday, where we could make a career out of playing games like hiding from one another under a piano. We would glide, char, and display the majesty of our love like it was a work of art. Watching a small event, like a bird flying over a wasted moon, would bring us to tears.



Una.

I have found that I have wanted to wrap my arms around her neck. I have wanted to grind my body into her womb, to climb into that space between her ribs, to feel the soft nub of her heart beating against my head. Look at the smooth milk of her lungs. Wake to her heartbeat. Fill her. Other times I have wanted to remember nothing, frustrated. Perhaps to scar her. Mark her with fissures, gullies, crevices, mar her with dense shadows, twist and wrench. I have wanted to eat her poached eggs, wanted to taste the smooth fluff of her pasties, wanted to take the glass of milk that she might have offered me once upon a time. I have wanted to see her head once more with its curled welter of hair thrown back from her face, and her forehead with its smooth skin sloping to heaven.

Sometimes, when I look out the window, I almost think that I can see one of her dresses hanging on the line, hard as a board.

Jane is squatting in the barn by the sheep. The violin cuts across the rain-filled hills like a bird gone insane that is trying to find a nest it never built. Happiness is difficult. There is something not quite as it should be. The music, for example, was not always there and probably should not be there now. And also the presence of the player, the boy, now always in close proximity. And there is also the day, which is like an opaque ashen ember.

Blue storm. It is too real to be believed. Scenery stored in her memory, in the place that's nearest to the essence of life. She dwells in her mind longer, too long, sinking into it. A place where forgiveness is never needed. A pure rejuvenation of the flowers beneath her skull. Like swirling smoke in water, the lines are drawn and spun quickly back inwards. If they are drawn too quickly, they will rise back up in fields of smoke and bubbled fog, a smoky mass hurling

and encircling nothing, like the shapes and shadows that passed by her when she was on her way back to the tent at night.

No, the colour is blue. Blue like the edge of a worn piece of paper after a finger's oils have touched it. A blue like the bottom of an empty glass when the light shines down into it and runs in circles around it. Blue like the body of a white bird in flight that passes under the shadow of a tree. Blue like the space beneath an eye, the place where the truth is always held. Blue like the bodies on stretchers that were gently laid on the tarpaulin in the admitting tent. She decides that she wants blue instead of red, because red was the colour of the unwashed sun when it rose in the morning after she had been awake all night amputating legs. It was the colour of the air from the stench of the badly wounded, which stifled the dusky light of the hurricane lamps and ran through her vision so that many of the wounded soldiers that were brought in on stretchers over the frozen hills seemed to all have the same face—the face of the clean-skinned youth whom she had killed. It was the colour of the sheets that she found on her bed one morning after unexpected intercourse the evening before, unexpected and not knowing that her vagina was already filled with blood, and the next morning her husband waking in shock to see his penis like a charred flag.

The way to him is through spirals. Or through trying to write the pitch of his music, or the look of him on paper. The way to him is through a line drawn over and over again until the curls of his hair become real. The way to him is through a three-hundred-and-sixty degree turn in consciousness, one that cannot

be gone back against. She wants him to be here again, here in blue without any parts of him bleeding into red. She wants him to be intensely like the sky.

But the image of the boy is never really visible. It is there most often in the pulse of the waves, because his chest had made the same quivering movement, a hurried, rushing up and down. His ribs and his belly were shaking when he was put on the table in front of her. She had put needles in his arms and held them between her fingers because she was shaking also. Her thumb worked down the nub of the syringe, forcing the yellow fluid into his arm. It was the first time that she had realised it was possible for legs to be held onto a body by only the very thin threads of tendons. Just the tendons, wired and loose like the worn strings of a violin attached the boy's feet to his knees. His shaking body made the tendons move like they really were the strings of a violin. She listened to the music he was making, the thick liquid of his open veins. All the noise from the talking of the doctors, nurses, and the wounded made it almost impossible to hear the boy's music. But she listened, leaning over him as she plugged another syringe into his arm. She heard the sound of something unnamed. She heard it for a moment there, hovering. And then one of the surgeons came. He stopped the music with a few snips of the boy's tendons. Just like that, no more music. The sharpened instruments cut through them like they were dough. Another nurse stopped the blood that was pouring out of his legs with pads of gauze. And the surgeon, as he ordered Jane to give the boy more blood, took the boy's legs from the knee down to the feet, one in each hand and threw them in a pail.

She drew the boy there, onto her forearm, with a thick line from the blue paint that she found in a can by the sheep stalls. The line was the string of his leg, only one. She listened for the violin, she put her ear up to her arm. And she heard it—the rising and falling of his chest. The big rush toward something and then the retraction and the pull. It sounded like the pulse of his heart, but it was really the sea outside the barn. The sea rising up into the sky each time it took a breath. And then the crash for no reason that she could tell, just like the boy's legs had lain in the pail for no reason that she knew of.

Jane thinks that Megan must be the same age as that boy. That time when a body is taking shape, when its curves and lines are becoming more sexed and sure. Jane thinks that the boy would have seen far more in his short life than Megan ever would in hers. Megan is a lot like herself, a lot like Gwyn also. When Jane sees Megan like this—with eyes unseeing—she wants her to be able to stay like this. If only she could be the parent that watches over the child. It was almost easier when Megan was a baby, it was easier for Jane to understand her feelings. Megan expressed everything through crying and tears. Now things are more complicated. There is speech. And Jane finds it difficult to discover things to talk about. It was easy then with them both in the quiet room together, but what now when there is a next day and a next? What can Jane tell her? If Megan did not look like her so much, things would be simpler. But it is because Megan looks like her that she feels she cannot lie. To do so would be to lie to herself and she is not going to do that. She is telling her story through memories because while she was in Korea, she promised herself that she would not think. She would work, she would see and experience the morning's calm. Megan's

vulnerability is alarming for Jane. She is still young. There is no fear behind her hazel eyes. Jane wants them to stay that way always. To protect her from the world. Megan can never know what Jane has seen. There are things that must be kept hidden. Jane slides a stroke of blue onto her other arm. Megan must not know what lies on the outside, what flows by and through everything that we come across.

Jane shudders. There is no breeze but it feels to her like there is one passing through the barn boards behind her. She should not trust anyone. Trust is dangerous. Trusting the wrong person can destroy a life. It takes far less time to destroy than to construct. And the person who does the devastation can walk away. Like her husband, Graeme (the bastard—don't call him that.) Where was he now that she was alone? He was off in a war, not fighting it though, just watching it. But then not even watching the fighting, not that close even. He was concealed behind walls of canvas waiting to see the war. He never made his existence vulnerable. Taking a risk was not part of what he wanted. His experiences were through the faces that came to him, that is how he saw the war, through faces on a table. All of them far younger than him, looking far older. Graeme had wanted to help them become young again, not by erasing their memories or decoding the things that had made them age so quickly—the horrors they had committed and the horrors they had seen—but by rebuilding their bodies into what he thought they should look like. Perhaps he believed that a healed body was a healed mind. Maybe it was himself that Graeme was trying to rebuild or his youth that had left him and would never return. Perhaps each broken boy who was put on the table was himself the way he had become. And

what he was doing was rebuilding himself over and over again, seeing the different things he could be or could have been.

Jane makes a short blue line on the palm of her hand moving toward her wrist. It is almost a square. It stands between the other two lines on her arms, centred and dominating Jane's eyes. Yet it takes no shape and even refuses to take shape, and in a way, descends into the background because it does not know what it is. She wonders for the first time that she has really let herself, whether or not she really knows who Graeme is. She has an idea of who he is, but does not know if it is really true. And one of the last times that she tried to fit herself in his arms, when she was full of sobs that he instructed her to muffle, she noticed how his arms went limp around her and how he turned his head away so that when she tried to look in his eyes, all she could see was their whites.

Jane walks out of the barn. There are hands cupped near the boy's mouth, he laughs. Or maybe it is more of a shout.

Go here. Go here. Go hear. Go hear. The violin plays. He is here. Somehow. The breeze. Sweeps. Plays like the devil coming soldier. She is panting. She is panting.

The sky is beginning to blacken with helicopters, star-headed. Spun vibrations echo in her throat. She wants them out. She wants to get out even though she knows that she has changed.

It had been as if she did not exist and she was not there anymore. She had stood motionless in her khaki slacks with the large zippered opening down the front, boots and gaiters on her feet.

It takes less than half a second to kill another human being. That is how long it took her to change the red to blue.

She saw nothing when she opened her eyes. She saw nothing in front of her, not the boy. It was like nothing existed, not even herself and she did not know the reason she was there. And it was not as if she decided to give him an A-positive transfusion. It just happened even after she'd checked his dog tags and read over and over again, type B, type B, type B, type B, type B, type B. She plugged it into his arm. His eyes did not widen. He did not look shocked, did not jerk back. Jane followed the line that his arms and legs made until they met at the centre of his body. And there, spreading out across his chest, she thought that she could see a red flower with petals reaching outwards. She thought that she could see, under the apex of his ribs, the stamen into which the blood she gave him was pouring.

My mother left her heavy sweater on the hook beside the stove. I didn't like her doing that, because I prefer that clothing is always put away. It's just one of my idiosyncrasies, you see. Everyone has them. I didn't like it because the sweater seemed to take on the form of her body without her body really being there. It seemed to me uncomfortably incomplete. Her body should have been there, in the sweater, warm as kindling. But there was something about the way it hung there, like it had been tossed onto the hook, and she had slid out of it, down by the stove where the floor was hard and polished. She wasn't on the floor. The sweater was just a reminder that her body had been in it at one point, just like the letters I found in her drawer were a reminder that she had once written letters I could understand. But that was before she and my father had gone to the war. I wanted to forget about these letters and move on with the business of life. All I wanted to do was think about my pregnancy, and the fact that I was

going to be able to tell Una about it ten days from then. I wanted to shut out everything that made blemishes, that didn't seem like a necessary part of living.

But those letters... I'd gone up to my mother's room to let her know that dinner was ready. Thomas had told me that she was sleeping there, that she had been all day. He didn't want her to miss dinner that night because he was making cawl, and had even gone to the butcher to get a fresh bird. He said the version he was making was festive—a boiled goose with oatmeal broth.

"Are you sure that there's actually oatmeal in the gravy?" I asked him while crossing my arms over my breasts—they were sore.

"Of course. I said so, didn't I?" he responded with a large smoke puff that billowed up to the ceiling of the kitchen. "There's nothing like oatmeal to thicken up a stew."

"But this isn't a stew," I looked at the goose resting in the pan.

"I know. But it'll be just as satisfying as a stew. The oatmeal will make it into a thick, fatty broth that will just be what you'll want to keep out the cold," he chuckled with a thick, smoky laugh. "Don't worry, Megan. It's a delicious recipe. Once you're sitting at the table with a hot bowl of it steaming up in front of you, sopping it up with a hunk of wholemeal bread and a chunk of good cheese, you'll be asking yourself why you were ever doubting Thomas."

"So you have a recipe for it?" I leaned onto the wall by my mother's sweater.

"Not necessary. It's all in my memory. I've got cawl in my heart," he answered, pointing at his chest.

So I called to my mother from the bottom of the stairs, not really wanting

to go up and see if she was putting on lipstick. When she didn't answer, I went up to find her in my grandmother's room. Once there, I realised that Thomas had been mistaken. It was like the sweater—she wasn't where she was supposed to be. The bed was empty, I could almost see her shape in the sheets. But she wasn't there. For some reason, I opened the drawer of the desk, as if she could actually have been inside of it, nestling and sleeping among the papers and my grandmother's fountain pens. And that's when I saw her. Not the real her, but a form of her, perhaps even stronger than the real person. Stacked into a neat pile were the letters that my mother had been writing. It was very intimate, like I had uncovered a place that was meant for no one, not even the sea.

Like the paper that I'd found on the field with Thomas, none of it appeared to have any word that I could recognise. The letters were covered in circles that had been engraved again and again in the same way. There were also the same X's that appeared in the margins as they had months before when I'd first shown one of my mother's letters to Una. It was as if she had been an amanuensis taking dictation.

I turned my head to face the window. A clutch of letters weighed in my hand. I wanted to get them away from me. In the distance, the ocean was opening itself up, calmly folding onto itself. There was the sky with its dark clouds rolling and unrolling above it. I thought to myself, look Megan, there's the ocean, but I wasn't really looking at it. What was I looking at? There was a stone wall that I could just see on the furthest edge of my periphery, so far away, just on the hill leading to the Wynn-Ellises. It ran away from the ocean. When I focussed on it, it seemed to change shapes and dart back and forth. It

grew and climbed over the field. In one moment, it seemed that a man's head wearing a black derby hat rose out of it. In another moment, it was covered by small candle flames. The wall followed the slope and fall of the rough land of Gwyn. At times, it seemed to block my view of the hills, and separate the sea from the land. I'd learned to love those stone fences encircling the countryside, and the way they would look wet even if it hadn't rained for at least two days. The stone was so old, and must have become very porous. I wondered if I walked up to one and pressed on it, if water would rise to the surface like a sponge. Or if I squeezed my face into the stone, if it would give and allow me to push my head deeply into it so that I would leave an impression of my head? If it were possible, I would have liked to do that all over Gwyn, so that I could show I'd been there. I would press my stomach into the stone when it began to grow, so that the land would know the miracle of Una's and my child.

But I knew that I wouldn't leave anything there and I didn't, just as I've never left anything lasting anywhere I've been. Of course I have a few things: my antique desk, my books, and my grandmother's mahogany table that survived the bombing of London. But they are things and mean nothing in a world that is really only made up of consciousness, dreams, and visions. They can be destroyed by fire, blitzkrieg, or insects. So what have they to do with me? And if I ask that question, then I must also ask the question that still remains: what do I have to do with? What am I, if nothing in this world can really be a part of me? I answer that I am me, but that is never, never enough and it spoils my reverie and makes me want to crawl under warm blankets. I am selfish with my thoughts or maybe they are selfish with me, taking me away from the world of things and

placing me in a world that I cannot define. I know there are other people like me, only I don't know who they are. I have always looked for them, but I have only known two others: my mother and my grandmother.

While I held my mother's letters and looked out the window, I saw her. Or, I was almost positive that I saw her. I thought that she was walking beside the wall, already quite a long ways off. But you see, I wasn't absolutely positive that it was my mother. The problem was that I didn't recognise what she was wearing, and I thought that I should have. She didn't have a very extensive wardrobe: a few cardigans, one party dress, a couple long skirts. Even though I strained my eyes, I couldn't see any of these clothes. And I might have just turned away, except that I thought I caught something in her step, in the way that she seemed to spring each time that she walked forward. I knew it was her. It was her walking away along the fields even as it started to rain. I was hoping that she would slow down her pace or turn back, but she continued along, arms rising and falling at her sides as if she was keeping pace with another person, as if she was walking in the army. Then I lost sight of her. She marched on, seemingly with no fear of the sky or the wind and the rain that began to strike the window just slightly harder.

I looked down at the letters in my hand. Letters to whom? Not to my father, of that I was sure. When I wrote him letters, they were real with solid descriptions. That's what he wanted. My mother's letters didn't say anything like that. Their entire drive was towards something else, more elusive than the sea even.

Then, at that moment, from inside of me, I felt the sensation of a bobbing up and down, as if I were a pot. The wind blew against the window casement. I moved backwards, awkwardly. I felt my hand crumbling the paper that it was holding. A minute, wiry line began to pulse in my abdomen. It was as if something was chiselling itself into my body from the inside, making a screen in front of it, a semi-transparent cage that would protect it. For the first time that I'd been in Wales, the rain outside actually began to pour down like it would on a cold November day at home in Canada. The shower fell relentlessly as if it was the last day of the world. The water pounded down on the house like it wanted to destroy it, and return the earth to the way it had been—rough green with great bursts of trees opening into the skies. Small streams formed, and flowed off the roof, rushing away, trying to escape to somewhere unknown.

I rushed into the bathroom, and lifted the toilet seat. Curd came out of me in a sudden, bursting into the toilet. I knelt there, gripping the edge of the porcelain, involuntarily hoisting myself over it as my body emitted more thickened and stringy fluid in an unruly column of spray. I wished for Una to comfort me. It was only going to be nine more days until she would, but that seemed so far away. After staying there for quite a few minutes, the life inside me driving all the liquid out, I winced as I pushed myself up off the floor, and swore gently as I turned the water on in the sink, cupped it in my hands and felt its coolness on my face. I pushed it into my mouth with my fingers, and ran it along my teeth.

I wanted a cigarette so badly that I could smell the smoke skimming the air. I was startled when I began to part my hair in the mirror, and there in front

of me was Thomas' reflection. He was chewing on a cigarette, his eyes brushed over the bathroom, over the toilet, before returning to mine in the mirror.

"What's wrong, Megan?" he asked.

I wished that what had happened in the toilet would just disappear. But I could see it there on my face when I looked in the mirror. I felt severed and drained. Sheets of rain fell onto the window. The front of my hair was moistened, damp from sweat. I coughed, and without turning to Thomas, wiped my mouth off on a towel. I went to look out the window, but couldn't see out of it. It had partially to do with the smoke from Thomas' cigarette but mostly to do with the drapes of water that were being hung outside in seemingly endless swathes of water. They fluttered in every direction. I could hear them cut over the house.

"Are you all right, Megan?" said Thomas, as he brought out his tobacco pouch to roll me a cigarette.

But I suddenly found the smell of his cigarette sickening. It made my stomach begin to roil again. I braced my body and tried to hold everything inside.

"No thanks," I said to him, and he shoved the pouch deeply into his pants' pocket.

"Are you cold?" he questioned me.

"No, why?"

"You're shivering." He seemed to be surveying the expression on my face. I knew I didn't look well.

"I'm fine."

“Well, even if you’re a bit cold now, I guarantee that once you get some cawl in your stomach, you won’t regret a thing. There’s nothing like oatmeal gravy to heat up a body.”

“I don’t want any, Thomas,” I said to him, while I attempted to smile faintly. “You go ahead.”

“Nonsense,” my grandfather said.

Just then, the phone rang. I wished he would leave to pick it up, but he stayed there suspended, waiting to hear its long double ring. And it happened, the tin of it echoing on my grandmother’s mahogany table in the living room.

But I knew that it was too late for me. It was the mention of cawl. I had pictured the goose boiled in oatmeal. I knew that I couldn’t reach the toilet, so I turned around and threw up in the sink, letting my hair fall into it.

“Megan!” my grandfather clamoured.

“No!” I shook him off from where he’d taken my shoulder. “Just get the phone,” I said.

I could hear him move away. Then his heavy footfalls on the wooden stairs down to the bottom floor.

He picked up the phone, “Thomas here.”

Tears ran down my cheeks into the sink. Una, I thought, Una. I had to see her that very day. Nine days was too far away. I had to see her. I had to meet her. I had to tell her about our child, our wonderful child, the love in me. I needed her help. I wasn’t going to be able to do this on my own.

The next moment when I smelt cigarette smoke, I knew that it wasn’t my own cravings, but my grandfather standing behind me.

“Megan,” he said. I pulled my head out of the sink, this time trying not to hide the mess of my face. He passed me my grandmother’s old wax jacket.

“Cover up with this.” He wrapped it around my shoulders and slipped each of my arms into the sleeves. Then he wiped my face with a towel, and put the hood around my head. It made things so that I didn’t have any peripheral vision. I could only see Thomas, and his sharp eyes.

“We have to go to fetch your mother, Megan.”



Thomas and I ran in the downpour out to the car. It was then, in the rain, that I realised my bladder was full, and I’d need to concentrate on holding it. My feet were as soaked as my socks and skirt. I had to rush directly through puddles, they were everywhere. The water was alive. It almost seemed to be shooting upwards from the earth—each time a drop fell, another drop rose out of the ground. Nature was backwards. It was raining out of the soil into the sky.

We headed out on the road to town. The sea swam along beside us.

“Where are we headed, Thomas?”

“Out near the spit,” rolling down the window, letting in the rain, and doing so as he answered me.

“Is that where Mum is?”

“Close by.”

“How do you know?”

“Owen Matthews saw her while he was picking up the afternoon post.”

“Saw her where?”

“I told you. Out on the spit!” he snapped.

“Well... I... You don’t have to say it like that. You don’t have to get upset with me.” I covered my face, because I didn’t mean to cry at all.

“I’m sorry, Megan.”

It had only been two months since my grandmother’s funeral. It felt like a hundred years. It had also been the last time that I’d been in a car with Thomas. He was focused on the road like he had been on the day of the funeral. He wasn’t even smoking. I thought about my grandmother. I wished that she was there with us. I didn’t even need to talk to her. I wanted to listen to what she said. The twists and turns of her words, even the shapes and forms of her statues—perhaps I would finally be able to make sense out of them. “There is a code encrypted within our being”—that’s what she’d said. They were even words. Did they not mean what my grandmother said they meant? Those phrases were plain. Perhaps there was no carnival for me to walk through in interpreting them, there was no circus act for me to do, perhaps I didn’t need to peel them off or to become drenched and coated in them in order to understand, perhaps the entranceway to them was clear. I pushed away my tears, and the hair that was clinging to my face. My body almost seemed to pulse with that idea for a few moments longer. Then I perceived that I couldn’t have saved my grandmother from her fate, that her death had more to do with something that existed in perpetuity than just chance.

Thinking about my grandmother, I felt absolved, and so I looked at the landscape. Wales was lived on two hundred and fifty thousand years ago? It’s

true, you know. I find this fascinating. It is also true that these people weren't human either. They are the other, the nearly-human. They wandered over those hills before my grandmother, Una, or I did. Clad in skins with low maws and bent backs. They are mostly forgotten, like Wales itself. But they lived there longer than we did. They never learned language, they never used words. A sad thing for me—the idea that words didn't exist at one time. I need them for my stories. Even if I only had a few of them, I could tell a different story every time. Instead of having words, those people had the land under their feet and the sky above it. Isn't that enough? Isn't that all that's really needed? Above and beyond words, we're still just bodies wandering around the earth. We're still just bodies, but we always think we're so much more. If those half-people who once lived on the fields where Thomas and I were driving had been given words, a language of their very own, it was everything around them. The trees, the rocks easing themselves into the sea, the green hills soaked with wet. That was their language. Then what was their story? Every night it would have been different, a different sun piercing their bodies, different clouds dragging finger-shadows across the sky. This language is around us, but we choose not to use it. We don't know what it's like to see around us.

Oh, but yes. I suppose I should talk about my mother. That is what we've arrived at. Now that I'm here, though. I don't really feel like it. It's funny. I've gone all this time telling this story, and for what? Just for it to be over? Just so we could put an end to it? If I had my way, I'd turn back and start telling it all over again. I'd return to the story of Una and me lying in the hay, or before that to when I was caught in a fever when my parents left for Korea, or even before

that when Thomas and I sat beside my grandmother as she made statues on the beach. Part of me wants to retell this narrative in a completely different way. Ah, but I can't do that to you. One thing then, promise me this: promise that you will return to this story, promise me that you will tell it to yourself, that you will start at the beginning, that you will let your memory soak in it, that you will think about it until you can feel it pulse in your heart, promise me that this story will live, because it must.

But I'll go on. Yes, my mother. Thomas and I back in the car...

"What was she doing?"

"Eh, what's that, Love?" Thomas was using his delicate tone, one that I'd often heard him use with my grandmother.

"What was Mum doing when Owen Matthews saw her?"

He sighed. Then he coughed. "She was standing in the rain."

"Standing... Standing how, Thomas?" I crossed-examined him. I was thinking about when I'd seen her marching across the field by the wall.

"I haven't a clue. That's what Owen Matthews said over the phone. Why, do you ask?"

"Just wondering." I brought my knees up to my chest and looked out the window. "Why didn't he pick her up and give her a lift home?"

"He said he tried to, but that she wasn't willing."

"She reminds me of Grandmother," I said, but then immediately wished I hadn't.

"Huh..." he paused. "Both of you do."

"What do you mean by that?"

“Don’t know,” he answered, doing his best to crouch his body down behind the steering wheel.

I did the same behind my knees. The drive was beginning to make me feel queasy. Thomas and I weren’t driving very far, it just felt like we were. We actually drove past the church where my grandmother’s funeral had taken place, and into a little hamlet. A few shops were there: a pub, a butchery, a small shop that had a little bit of everything—letters could be dropped off, pies could be bought, there was also a chemist in the back.

We parked by the church where a couple people were standing, rain brimming over their umbrellas. It seemed that they had intended to go to the shops. I saw Iwan there, wearing his peaked cap and a wool scarf tied tightly around his neck. He was standing too closely beside Claire, one of the girls in my class. Or maybe it was her who was too near to him. He looked at me with a sympathetic smile, and nodded before I stepped out of the car. Rain ran down the windows in drizzling tendrils. I nodded back to him without meaning to. When I stepped out of the car, the shower ticked harshly on the hood of my jacket. Through the rain, I could hear my mother’s voice making raucous shouts and pleadings.

I turned to the direction from which the noise was coming. Thomas’ figure was in my way, so I looked into the shop. There were great piles of hard cheeses all in rounds with their outsides waxed or in boxes in the window. Slabs of it lay in fans. The woman in the shop was standing, holding a piece of it while looking out the window at my mother. Also in the window display, were dozens of identical pies set in line one after the other behind signs that noted their

contents. The signs were all in Welsh. I translated each one using words that Una had taught me: *pastai persli*—parsley pie, *pastai bwmpen*—marrow pie, *pastai gwningen*—rabbit pie, *pastai gwydd*—goose pie. Further into the shop, I saw that there were also thick and glutinous slices of each pie for sampling. They all had a grey colour to them, even the parsley pie looked like a wet slate roof. I repeated the names of those pies to myself like I was producing tales. I wanted to continue on with them in endless ripples, until they became a squall of visions. Everywhere there would be pies hanging through the air. I began to feel queasy again.

Thomas walked a few steps from the car towards the butchery shop with squelching boots and wisps of smoke. I followed directly behind. I could see into the shop. There were a few different butcher counters. Two butchers in white smocks stood to the side, peering out at my mother. I'm not sure that I understand the reason for butchers to wear white. It seems like black would be more appropriate—that way the blood would be hidden and would only appear in dark patches or shapes that only seemed to be partly there. They would be blood shadows, things that would change and disappear with the turn of a head. But on white, there was no mistaking them. Red stains in splatters and thick thumb-lines criss-crossed the front of each butcher's white apron. I saw discomfort on one of the man's faces as I stared at him, broad-eyed and wet, but I couldn't help myself. It was either that I look at my mother or that I look at him.

Life always has a way with it, don't you think? You never know what small journeys you will take, how it will draw you along. I never could have

known that I would be there to witness my mother creating, draping, hanging, balancing, using, coating, coagulating, shining, imaging, emerging, living, gaining, presenting, motioning, envisioning, raising, reacting, thumbing, needing, striking, painting, using, lining, producing, debasing, wasting, accusing, affirming, bringing, owning, longing, allowing, facing, patterning, beginning, making, sensing, meaning, clearing, spacing, leaving, centring, layering, narrowing, finalising, seeing, being, piecing, realising, doing, having, demanding, summoning, fevering, brutalising, screeching, howling, obliterating, knowing.

By that time, I was trying to look at her. I had somehow turned away from the butcher, and I was trying to see what was really around me. But my eyes felt like they couldn't take in anything. It was like there was a filter, a thick, permeable mask that took me away from the place where I was. I was behaving like my grandmother had. I had to stop doing this. It was dangerous. It was like being sucked into a vortex. Someone could be speaking to me—anyone, Owen Matthews, Thomas or even Una, and I'd be nodding, smiling and looking back at them, responding to all their pauses and gestures, but I really wouldn't understand a word that they said. I would be off somewhere, thinking of something else. The leap back into reality would be too great, and most often, I wouldn't be able to make it—the floor that my feet were resting on would be too compelling, the dark sky with a white stripe of clouds would be too demanding, and I'd have to think about them, the floor and the clouds, more than the person who was sitting in front of me, more than my mother who was standing in front of the butcher's shop half-naked.

I think that if I had noticed what was happening around me a bit more, I would have been able to recognise that there was something terribly wrong. My mother's head turned ever so slowly, ever so slowly her head shook. Once, twice. I wanted to hide somewhere in the pub or in the back seat of the car. I shouldn't have seen her face crack. I knew what it was. There was something wrong. My mother never came back. My mother never saw me again. I knew what it was. She never walked by the sea.

I stood there watching her. I thought of the letters she had written, and the symbols that littered their pages. Perhaps walking in the rain had broken the seal of their skin, perhaps it had caused the fever that was boiling inside her to flow outwards. I looked at her body, just as everyone else was doing, even Thomas. Down her arms to the end of her fingertips, like she had been trying to draw an aisle, a direction to point at, were different lines of blue marks. She had painted the symbols and codes that I'd seen on the paper in my grandmother's desk onto her body. When I looked closer, both of her arms seemed to course with mouths. And then, when I looked again, I saw heads that were encircled by wide chains. I could see this in my mother's arms. I could read it in the blue paint that she'd pressed onto her body.

I wondered if Thomas could see it. He was stepping delicately towards where my mother was standing, shivering in the rain in front of the butcher shop. On the skin of her back, I could see that she had attempted to call together arched strokes of blue paint, they wound around in an effort to make a circle, walking over her spine, telling a story that I thought I was understanding for the very first time. I grasped what they were saying, because I had seen them

before in the statues that my grandmother had built out of wood, stones, and shells on the cliffs by the beach. Perhaps it was the rain that had done it, seeing my mother drenched in front of the butcher's reminded me of my grandmother when she had gotten lost on her way to town several months before.

I took a few steps towards my mother, because she was crying—except no tears were coming out of her eyes, just a sound out of her mouth. It rose and fell, a calling and begging. There was also strange whispering that came from her lips. She held both her hands in front of her, not quite reaching out, but trying to pull something back into her. I could feel the people who were standing around us start to look away. A few of them walked behind me, turned around, and disappeared down the road just to the side of the shops.

My eyes followed the path of my mother's. Blue paint dripped from the circle on her back, and sank into the waistband of her skirt. There was a steel hook in front of us. Pushed over this hook was a carcass. Its legs were splayed so that it somehow appeared to be in motion—running somewhere or just waking from a very long sleep. Its skin was a smooth, creamed rose that was clear and unblemished. There was no head, no tail, no hoofs or hands. There were also no cuts, no slices taken out of it. It was clean and quiet, not moving, not calling, not asking, not gesturing. It was perfectly dead. The only thing that marred the picture was the steel of the hook that had broken its skin, and was protruding like a tusk out of its back.

It sounded like my mother was speaking in short breaths. A language made of breath sounds, fast and sharp. It was the kind of sound that a baby forms when it is trying to make its lungs work after an entire evening of sobbing

and wailing about the shock of the world and how cold it is. It almost sounded like words were being whispered underneath each inhalation and exhalation between clenched and unclenched teeth. Step, shake, hat, tear, find, rack, knot, crust, grit, make, wave, wood, yank. I listened to these real and imagined words. But it was more the look on her face that I was listening to, because it was the kind of expression that is heard more than it can ever be seen. It didn't come from the eyes—or at least that's not where I looked. They can close themselves, set their blacks against scrutiny and blend their colours into a peaceful kind of mud, so that it's impossible to know what really exists on the other side of them. No, I looked at my mother's mouth, her jaw twitching with each breath and each incomprehensible word. I saw something dark inside her mouth. Something that had hold of her jaw. A hideous beast. Something awful.

Thomas had taken his coat off and gently, very gently, laid it across her shoulders.

I took hold of her shoulder with both hands and encircled it.

She turned to me, remarkably and more quickly than I'd expected said, "He's here."

But the beast was still there, having taken firm hold of her mouth. I almost thought I heard it howl.

Then Thomas said, "It's time to go."

I didn't quite know what to say. How could I explain that we'd already been somewhere very far away and I didn't know if we could both come back?

But it was my mother who said with a twitching smile that was almost hers, "Did you hear that, Megan? The violin?"

And so we left, one of us on each side of her, walking towards the car. People looked on under the shelter of their umbrellas. They stood in a row, trying to look down, trying not to stare at my mother who had blue streaks of paint all down her neck and on her face. Thomas walked ahead and opened the back door of the car. I felt relieved as the space between us and the hung, dead pig widened.

While we drove back to the house, the rain stopped. There was only a torrent of water flowing along the streets in deep runnels.

I talked the entire way back. "Look," I said. "There's the ocean."

That night after we got my mother back to the house, Thomas and I sat with her in my grandmother's bedroom. I had done my best to wipe the blue paint off her face with a warm cloth, but I hadn't been able to clean up all of it. The paint had run into her hair, her ears, down the back of her neck. Neither Thomas nor I attempted to wipe off the paint on her chest or her back. It seemed too private. And I wanted to give her body back to her after it had been exposed in the open rain of that day.

Sitting there beside her, a few candles lit to throw gentle light into the room, shadows glowing and then receding against her closed eyelids, I thought of the night a few months before when Thomas and I had sat beside my grandmother's body. The difference was that my mother's body was alive. I could see her chest rising up and down in its breathing—the steady pulse of the living. And she was living. As sorry as I had been that my grandmother had died,

I was equally happy that no harm had befallen my mother. Or rather, no harm that I could see. I later realised that part of her had been killed—or was it that part of her had come alive? Was it that she had not died, but had been born? And was that what was happening to me with the life that I knew was thrumming inside the dome of my abdomen? Yes! I looked at her lying on my grandmother's bed. It seemed that we had all needed something else, or someone else, more precisely. None of us walked alone, none of us lived alone—it was the code encrypted within our being.

I never saw that part of my mother again. She would go to a place that would remove it, or mask it perhaps. She would be there for several months, only returning home once my father did. Later, pens would not be permitted, nor would blank pieces of paper. She would have a scrapbook instead. Into it, she would paste newspaper clippings of electoral polls set up in kitchens, the price of a chocolate bar increasing by seven cents, and Elvis Presley's Canadian tour. She would often lie down on the living room sofa, or stay awake at night, standing in the kitchen until her eyes focussed in the dark. Sometimes she would curl into the pantry and sleep there. Other times, she would telephone me and I would try to stay awake, listening to her stories about the war, and what it felt like when there were no lights on. And she would talk about the time she spent in Wales, and the strong desire she felt—the fact that she had made a kind of discovery. She would ask me if I'd felt something like that while I was there... I would be quiet. There would be no possibility of discussion. My mother didn't know about the child. Instead, I would ask her about herself, and listen to the absence in my voice, the absence of feeling.

Oh, but I suppose I'm getting ahead of myself. I don't really want to. That story isn't the one that I want to tell. It is predictable, and boring, and filled with endless hours, one identical to the next. No, I will stay where I am. I will end where we are. When you remember me, I want you to remember me there.

If I had been Thomas, I would have done the same thing. Sitting in his wife's room only months after she had been taken by the sea, looking at his daughter who had painted herself with sheep's paint and then walked to the butchery in a neighbouring hamlet, and spending a quiet moment with his granddaughter who seemed to have a mysterious sickness that caused her to spend unusually long periods in the washroom—what would anyone have done?

"I think I'm going to write your father a letter," he said as we both watched my mother, still in a slight blue glow.

I half-listened, thinking that it was only going to be nine more days until I could see Una. Nine more days until she would know. Nine more days until she would be beside me. I thought I could feel something passing through me, something almost invisibly. It was ours. It made me believe.

"What are you going to say in the letter?" I stroked Dewi's back with my foot.

"I'm not sure. What do you think?"

"You can tell him what happened," I suggested.

I wasn't thinking. I wasn't focussed on the moment, because my mother looked so peaceful in the way she was sleeping. And I was thinking about meeting Una on the fields. Looking at Una was like looking at forever, looking

at the fields was like looking at forever. They were green. They were the greenest green I've ever looked at, a green that I didn't think was possible. It was the rain that did that. It fell every day in swathes. I wanted to walk through them as I went to meet Una across the field. Each step would be like being reborn. I would feel the cool flush on my face.

“So, do you think I should tell him everything that happened?” Thomas questioned. His cigarette was smouldering. I found the smell nauseating.

I stayed there, while my mother returned to Canada. I didn't remain there exactly, not in my beloved Wales with the wide sky, the wide ocean, the wide, clear eyes of Una Wynn-Ellis. What I wanted to do was to stand on a cliff with Una by my side, the soft earth wet beneath our feet with the day's rain. I wanted the water to come boldly to the rock face below with its mane thrown back, rushing as it approached in search of a lovely end. I wanted to watch it greeting its own destruction, reaching the moment when it burst into a billion long cones of water and spat up at us on the cliff. What I wanted was to turn to Una, and to see how the strong gusts of wind caught her face. I wanted to stop up her ears for a moment, and transport her with me. I wanted only for the sound in her ears to be that of the wind over the Welsh cliff. And then I wanted to talk to her while calming everything outside her. I wanted to lead a dialogue until I was

filling the air inside her with words that would come from deep within me, sounds filling her that came from our child—a voice from inside my body.

That is what I wanted. But it is so difficult to get what one wants. In fact, I have found that it is the most difficult thing to get in life. The difference between what we want and what we get is pain. Pain is the huge crevice between our dreams and our reality. The two can often never be reconciled. My dream: to share my life with Una, and our child by the sea at Gwyn.

But that never happened, you see, it never did. My father took a leave of absence to accompany my mother back to Canada. Once there, he said that he was going to get help for her. I didn't know what that meant, I never found out exactly. I was relieved in a way that she was going to be safe, that she wouldn't wander off with her body wearing symbols. I found it difficult to be glad that my father had returned. He seemed so serious. His jaw was set. And all I wanted to do was to see Una. I just needed one moment to tell her what our life together was going to be like. But it was the way my father said it to me, barely turning his head, playing with Dewi's ears, emotion in his voice—he would like it if I saw them off in London. And it was the way that I was looking at the waves on the ocean, and thinking about my grandmother and how strange it would be to return home, that made me think, yes. I thought, yes, I'll do it. Why wouldn't I? It would be the last time I'd see my mother for a long time—although I wasn't going to tell her that I was going to be staying there with Thomas by the salty water on the coast of Wales. I brought an overnight bag, with only an extra blouse and a roomy cardigan to hide my expanding abdomen. And those were the clothes that I ended up wearing every day for the next week until Thomas

received my father's letter and sent my suitcases and all my other things as he was instructed. I half expected Thomas to rescue me, to show up himself and take me back to the sea, but he could never have gone against my father's wishes. And there I stayed, for the rest of the term, sharing a room with two other girls. All they could talk about was their lovers. I didn't talk about Una—I just imagined her with me all the time. And the one time I tried to escape—when they were bringing in a meal tray. The head mistress slapped me across the face after I was caught, and they took away my clothes and I had to wear pyjamas for two weeks. We weren't permitted to write letters, use the telephone, or go for walks by ourselves.

I felt that I should have been able to keep our child. I felt I should have been able to keep him. I was in labour from one afternoon to the next morning. The sweat poured off me like I was sinking in the ocean. I was there by myself, without anyone who loved me, without you, Una. And they didn't even show me our beautiful baby. I was so tired afterwards, more tired than I have been all my life. But I thought that one thing they couldn't take from me was my memory. So I raised my head and caught sight of him, just as the nurse was carrying him away. And I took that secret away with me, sharing it with no one. But now I can tell you. It was this—our child has your cobalt, azure, cerulean, unworldly, ocean blue eyes.

After his birth, I had wanted to remain on that side of the sea. But before I'd properly recovered, I found myself escorted to the airport and sent back to Canada. Do you have any idea what it is like to have your freedom taken away

from you? Do you have any idea what it's like to be locked up in some institution, because someone thinks it is for your own good?

Do something for me. I want you to look down at the water shovelling itself onto the beach. I want you to see how the beach is made of sand when the water withdraws and the waves begin to build again. I want you to see the rock edges emerging out of the sand, their smooth, almost luminous surfaces. I want you to stand above the tug of the waves. And I want you to think of us—your child and me. I want us to find him somewhere, somehow through the adoption agency. It will not be difficult with his clear, luminescent blue eyes. I have attempted to write letters to you, but have always received them back marked “Return to Sender.” The hand in which those words are written is Iwan’s, I am sure of it. I will find out. I will return back over the sea to you.

Una: your name is one of the last things I say to myself at the end of each day. You once told me that it means one, that it means pure, that it means together, that it means white wave.